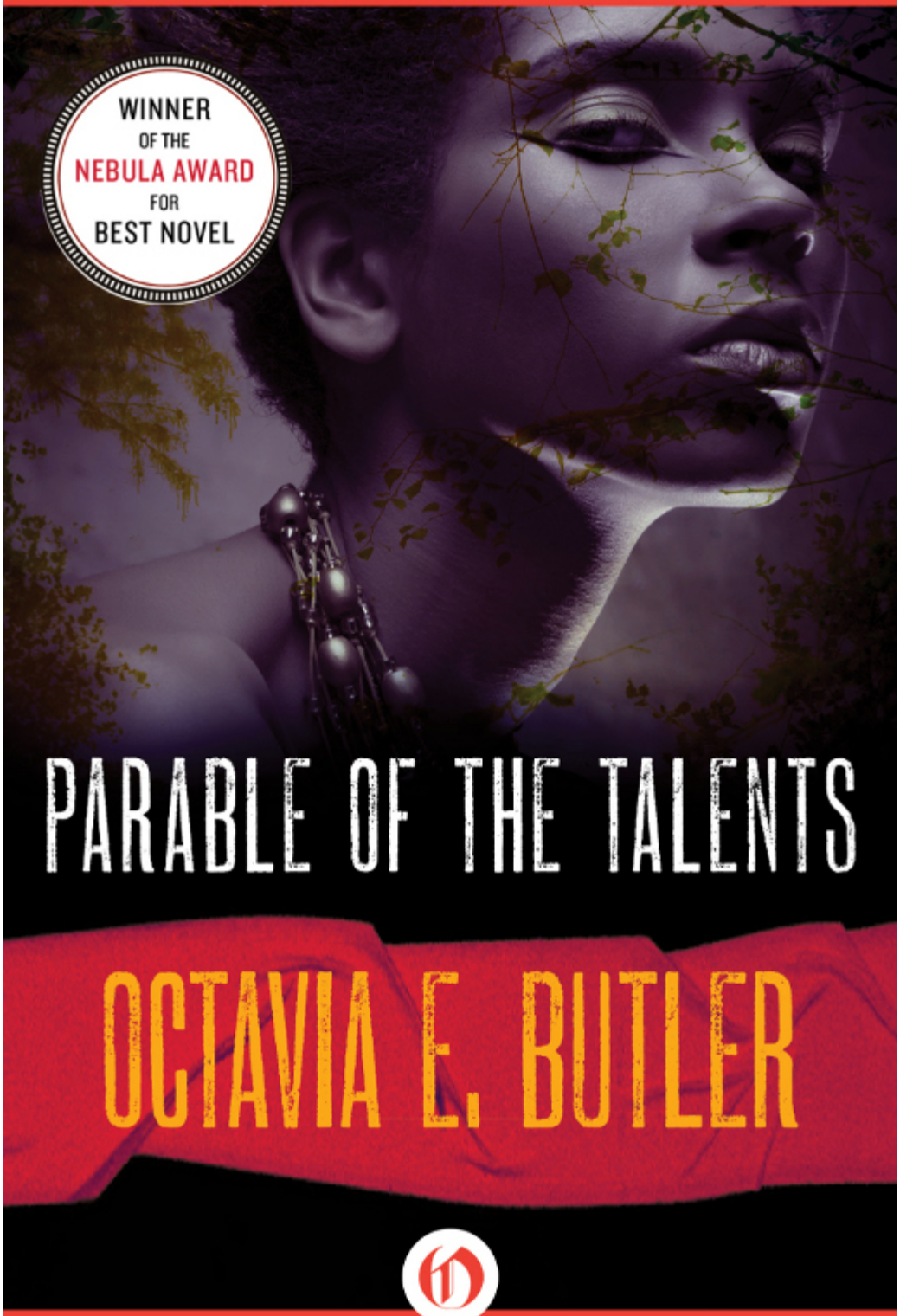
WINNER
OF THE
NEBULA AWARD
FOR
BEST NOVEL
PARABLE OF THE TALENTS
OCTAVIA E. BUTLER

Parable of the Talents

Octavia E. Butler

TO MY AUNTS
IRMA HARRIS AND
HAZEL RUTH WALKER,
AND IN MEMORY OF MY MOTHER
OCTAVIA MARGARET BUTLER

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PROLOGUE

From EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING
By Lauren Oya Olamina

Here we are—
Energy,
Mass,
Life,
Shaping life,
Mind,
Shaping Mind,
God,
Shaping God.
Consider—
We are born
Not with purpose,
But with potential.

THEY'LL MAKE A GOD of her.

I think that would please her, if she could know about it. In spite of all her protests and denials, she's always needed devoted, obedient followers—disciples—who would listen to her and believe everything she told them. And she needed large events to manipulate. All gods seem to need these things.

Her legal name was Lauren Oya Olamina Bankole. To those who loved her or hated her, she was simply "Olamina."

She was my biological mother.

She is dead.

I have wanted to love her and to believe that what happened between her and me wasn't her fault. I've wanted that. But instead, I've hated her, feared her, needed her. I've never trusted her, though, never understood how she could be the way she was—so focused, and yet so misguided, there for all the world, but never there for me. I still don't understand. And now that she's dead, I'm not even sure I ever will. But I must try because I need to understand myself, and she is part of me. I wish that she weren't, but she is. In order for me to understand who I am, I must begin to understand who she was. That is my reason for writing and assembling this book.

It has always been my way to sort through my feelings by writing. She and I had that in common. And along with the need to write, she also developed a need to draw. If she had been born in a saner time, she might have become a writer as I have or an artist.

I've gathered a few of her drawings, although she gave most of these away during her lifetime. And I have copies of all that was saved of her writings. Even some of her early, paper notebooks have been copied to disk or crystal and saved. She had a habit, during her youth, of hiding caches of food, money, and weaponry in out-of-the-way places or with trusted people, and being able to go straight back to these years later. These saved her life several times, and also they saved her words, her journals and notes and my father's writings. She managed to badger him into writing a little. He wrote well, although he didn't like doing it. I'm glad she badgered him. I'm glad to have known him at least through his writing. I wonder why I'm not glad to have

known her through hers.

"God is Change," my mother believed. That was what she said in the first of her verses in *Earthseed: The First Book of the Living.*

All that you touch
You Change.

All that you Change
Changes you.

The only lasting truth
Is Change.

God
Is Change.

The words are harmless, I suppose, and metaphorically true. At least she began with some species of truth. And now she's touched me one last time with her memories, her life, and her damned Earthseed.

2032

From EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING

We give our dead
To the orchards
And the groves.
We give our dead
To life.

ONE

From EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING

Darkness
Gives shape to the light
As light
Shapes the darkness.
Death
Gives shape to life
As life
Shapes death.
The universe
And God
Share this wholeness,
Each
Defining the other.
God
Gives shape to the universe
As the universe
Shapes God.

FROM *Memories of Other Worlds*
BY TAYLOR FRANKLIN BANKOLE

I HAVE READ THAT the period of upheaval that journalists have begun to refer to as "the Apocalypse" or more commonly, more bitterly, "the Pox" lasted from 2015 through 2030—a decade and a half of chaos. This is untrue. The Pox has been a much longer torment. It began well before 2015, perhaps even before the turn of the

millennium. It has not ended.

I have also read that the Pox was caused by accidentally coinciding climatic, economic, and sociological crises. It would be more honest to say that the Pox was caused by our own refusal to deal with obvious problems in those areas. We caused the problems: then we sat and watched as they grew into crises. I have heard people deny this, but I was born in 1970. I have seen enough to know that it is true. I have watched education become more a privilege of the rich than the basic necessity that it must be if civilized society is to survive. I have watched as convenience, profit, and inertia excused greater and more dangerous environmental degradation. I have watched poverty, hunger, and disease become inevitable for more and more people.

Overall, the Pox has had the effect of an installment-plan World War III. In fact, there were several small, bloody shooting wars going on around the world during the Pox. These were stupid affairs—wastes of life and treasure. They were fought, ostensibly, to defend against vicious foreign enemies. All too often, they were actually fought because inadequate leaders did not know what else to do. Such leaders knew that they could depend on fear, suspicion, hatred, need, and greed to arouse patriotic support for war.

Amid all this, somehow, the United States of America suffered a major nonmilitary defeat. It lost no important war, yet it did not survive the Pox. Perhaps it simply lost sight of what it once intended to be, then blundered aimlessly until it exhausted itself.

What is left of it now, what it has become, I do not know.

Taylor Franklin Bankole was my father. From his

writings, he seems to have been a thoughtful, somewhat formal man who wound up with my strange, stubborn mother even though she was almost young enough to be his granddaughter.

My mother seems to have loved him, seems to have been happy with him. He and my mother met during the Pox when they were both homeless wanderers. But he was a 57-year-old doctor—a family practice physician—and she was an 18-year-old girl. The Pox gave them terrible memories in common. Both had seen their neighborhoods destroyed—his in San Diego and hers in Robledo, a suburb of Los Angeles. That seems to have been enough for them. In 2027, they met, liked each other, and got married. I think, reading between the lines of some of my father's writing, that he wanted to take care of this strange young girl that he had found. He wanted to keep her safe from the chaos of the time, safe from the gangs, drugs, slavery, and disease. And of course he was flattered that she wanted him. He was human, and no doubt tired of being alone. His first wife had been dead for about two years when they met.

He couldn't keep my mother safe of course. No one could have done that. She had chosen her path long before they met. His mistake was in seeing her as a young girl. She was already a missile, armed and targeted.

FROM *The Journals of Lauren Oya Olamina*
SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 2032

Today is Arrival Day, the fifth anniversary of our establishing a community called Acorn here in the

mountains of Humboldt County.

In perverse celebration of this, I've just had one of my recurring nightmares. They've become rare in the past few years—old enemies with familiar nasty habits. I know them. They have such soft, easy beginnings.… This one was, at first, a visit to the past, a trip home, a chance to spend time with beloved ghosts.

My old home has come back from the ashes. This doesn't surprise me, somehow, although I saw it burn years ago. I walked through the rubble that was left of it. Yet here it is restored and filled with people—all the people I knew as I was growing up. They sit in our front rooms in rows of old metal folding chairs, wooden kitchen and dining room chairs, and plastic stacking chairs, a silent congregation of the scattered and the dead.

Church service is already going on, and, of course, my father is preaching. He looks as he always has in his church robes: tall, broad, stern, straight—a great black wall of a man with a voice you not only hear, but feel on your skin and in your bones. There's no corner of the meeting rooms that my father cannot reach with that voice. We've never had a sound system—never needed one. I hear and feel that voice again.

Yet how many years has it been since my father vanished? Or rather, how many years since he was killed? He must have been killed. He wasn't the kind of man who would abandon his family, his community, and his church. Back when he vanished, dying by violence was even easier than it is today. Living, on the other hand was almost impossible.

He left home one day to go to his office at the college. He taught his classes by computer, and only had to go to the

college once a week, but even once a week was too much exposure to danger. He stayed overnight at the college as usual. Early mornings were the safest times for working people to travel. He started for home the next morning and was never seen again.

We searched. We even paid for a police search. Nothing did any good.

This happened many months before our house burned, before our community was destroyed. I was 17. Now I'm 23 and I'm several hundred miles from that dead place.

Yet all of a sudden, in my dream, things have come right again.

I'm at home, and my father is preaching. My stepmother is sitting behind him and a little to one side at her piano. The congregation of our neighbors sits before him in the large, not-quite-open area formed by our living room, dining room, and family room. This is a broad L-shaped space into which even more than the usual 30 or 40 people have crammed themselves for Sunday service. These people are too quiet to be a Baptist congregation—or at least, they're too quiet to be the Baptist congregation I grew up in. They're here, but somehow not here. They're shadow people. Ghosts.

Only my own family feels real to me. They're as dead as most of the others, and yet they're alive! My brothers are here and they look the way they did when I was about 14. Keith, the oldest of them, the worst and the first to die, is only 11. This means Marcus, my favorite brother and always the best-looking person in the family, is 10. Ben and Greg, almost as alike as twins, are eight and seven. We're all sitting in the front row, over near my stepmother so she can keep an eye on us. I'm sitting between Keith and Marcus to keep them from killing each other during the service.

When neither of my parents is looking, Keith reaches across me and punches Marcus hard on the thigh. Marcus, younger, smaller, but always stubborn, always tough, punches back. I grab each boy's fist and squeeze. I'm bigger and stronger than both of them and I've always had strong hands. The boys squirm in pain and try to pull away. After a moment, I let them go. Lesson learned. They let each other alone for at least a minute or two.

In my dream, their pain doesn't hurt me the way it always did when we were growing up. Back then, since I was the oldest, I was held responsible for their behavior. I had to control them even though I couldn't escape their pain. My father and stepmother cut me as little slack as possible when it came to my hyperempathy syndrome. They refused to let me be handicapped. I was the oldest kid, and that was that. I had my responsibilities.

Nevertheless I used to feel every damned bruise, cut, and burn that my brothers managed to collect. Each time I saw them hurt, I shared their pain as though I had been injured myself. Even pains they pretended to feel, I did feel. Hyperempathy syndrome is a delusional disorder, after all. There's no telepathy, no magic, no deep spiritual awareness. There's just the neurochemically-induced delusion that I feel the pain and pleasure that I see others experiencing. Pleasure is rare, pain is plentiful, and, delusional or not, it hurts like hell.

So why do I miss it now?

What a crazy thing to miss. Not feeling it should be like having a toothache vanish away. I should be surprised and happy. Instead, I'm afraid. A part of me is gone. Not being able to feel my brothers' pain is like not being able to hear them when they shout, and I'm afraid.

The dream begins to become a nightmare.

Without warning, my brother Keith vanishes. He's just gone. He was the first to go—to die—years ago. Now he's vanished again. In his place beside me, there is a tall, beautiful woman, black-brown-skinned and slender with long, crow-black hair, gleaming. She's wearing a soft, silky green dress that flows and twists around her body, wrapping her in some intricate pattern of folds and gathers from neck to feet. She is a stranger.

She is my mother.

She is the woman in the one picture my father gave me of my biological mother. Keith stole it from my bedroom when he was nine and I was twelve. He wrapped it in an old piece of a plastic tablecloth and buried it in our garden between a row of squashes and a mixed row of corn and beans. Later, he claimed it wasn't his fault that the picture was ruined by water and by being walked on. He only hid it as a joke. How was he supposed to know anything would happen to it? That was Keith. I beat the hell out of him. I hurt myself too, of course, but it was worth it. That was one beating he never told our parents about.

But the picture was still ruined. All I had left was the memory of it. And here was that memory, sitting next to me.

My mother is tall, taller than I am, taller than most people. She's not pretty. She's beautiful. I don't look like her. I look like my father, which he used to say was a pity. I don't mind. But she is a stunning woman.

I stare at her, but she does not turn to look at me. That, at least, is true to life. She never saw me. As I was born, she died. Before that, for two years, she took the popular "smart drug" of her time. It was a new prescription medicine called Paracetco, and it was doing wonders for people who had Alzheimer's disease. It stopped the deterioration of their

intellectual function and enabled them to make excellent use of whatever memory and thinking ability they had left. It also boosted the performance of ordinary, healthy young people. They read faster, retained more, made more rapid, accurate connections, calculations, and conclusions. As a result, Paracetco became as popular as coffee among students, and, if they meant to compete in any of the highly paid professions, it was as necessary as a knowledge of computers.

My mother's drug taking may have helped to kill her. I don't know for sure. My father didn't know either. But I do know that her drug left its unmistakable mark on me—my hyperempathy syndrome. Thanks to the addictive nature of Paracetco—a few thousand people died trying to break the habit—there were once tens of millions of us.

Hyperempaths, we're called, or hyperempathists, or sharers. Those are some of the polite names, And in spite of our vulnerability and our high mortality rate, there are still quite a few of us.

I reach out to my mother. No matter what she's done, I want to know her. But she won't look at me. She won't even turn her head. And somehow, I can't quite reach her, can't touch her. I try to get up from my chair, but I can't move. My body won't obey me. I can only sit and listen as my father preaches.

Now I begin to know what he is saying. He has been an indistinct background rumble until now, but now I hear him reading from the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew, quoting the words of Christ:

" 'For the kingdom of Heaven is as a man traveling into a far country who called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods. And unto One he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one; to every man according to

his several ability; and straightway took his journey' "

My father loved parables—stories that taught, stories that presented ideas and morals in ways that made pictures in people's minds. He used the ones he found in the Bible, the ones he plucked from history, or from folk tales, and of course he used those he saw in his life and the lives of people he knew. He wove stories into his Sunday sermons, his Bible classes, and his computer-delivered history lectures. Because he believed stories were so important as teaching tools, I learned to pay more attention to them than I might have otherwise. I could quote the parable that he was reading now, the parable of the talents. I could quote several Biblical parables from memory. Maybe that's why I can hear and understand so much now. There is preaching between the bits of the parable, but I can't quite understand it. I hear its rhythms rising and falling, repeating and varying, shouting and whispering. I hear them as I've always heard them, but I can't catch the words—except for the words of the parable.

" 'Then he that had received the five talents went and traded with the same and made them another five talents. And likewise he that had received two, he also gained another two. But he that had received one went out and digged in the earth, and hid his lord's money.' "

My father was a great believer in education, hard work, and personal responsibility. "Those are our talents," he would say as my brothers' eyes glazed over and even I tried not to sigh. "God has given them to us, and he'll judge us according to how we use them."

The parable continues. To each of the two servants who had traded well and made profit for their lord, the lord said, " 'Well done, thou good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many

things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord.' "

But to the servant who had done nothing with his silver talent except bury it in the ground to keep it safe, the lord said harsher words. " 'Thou wicked and slothful servant …' " he began. And he ordered his men to, " 'Take therefore the talent from him and give it unto him which hath ten talents. For unto everyone that hath shall be given, and he shall have in abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.' "

When my father has said these words, my mother vanishes. I haven't even been able to see her whole face, and now she's gone.

I don't understand this. It scares me. I can see now that other people are vanishing too. Most have already gone. Beloved ghosts.…

My father is gone. My stepmother calls out to him in Spanish the way she did sometimes when she was excited, "No! How can we live now? They'll break in. They'll kill us all! We must build the wall higher!"

And she's gone. My brothers are gone. I'm alone—as I was alone that night five years ago. The house is ashes and rubble around me. It doesn't burn or crumble or even fade to ashes, but somehow, in an instant, it is a ruin, open to the night sky. I see stars, a quarter moon, and a streak of light, moving, rising into the sky like some life force escaping. By the light of all three of these, I see shadows, large, moving, threatening. I fear these shadows, but I see no way to escape them. The wall is still there, surrounding our neighborhood, looming over me much higher than it ever truly did. So much higher.…It was supposed to keep danger out. It failed years ago. Now it fails again. Danger is walled in with me. I want to run, to escape, to hide, but now my own hands, my feet begin to fade away. I hear

thunder. I see the streak of light rise higher in the sky, grow brighter.

Then I scream. I fall. Too much of my body is gone, vanished away. I can't stay upright, can't catch myself as I fall and fall and fall.…

I awoke here in my cabin at Acorn, tangled in my blankets, half on and half off my bed. Had I screamed aloud? I didn't know. I never seem to have these nightmares when Bankole is with me, so he can't tell me how much noise I make. It's just as well. His practice already costs him enough sleep, and this night must be worse than most for him.

It's three in the morning now, but last night, just after dark, some group, some gang, perhaps, attacked the Dovetree place just north of us. There were, yesterday at this time, 22 people living at Dovetree—the old man, his wife, and his two youngest daughters; his five married sons, their wives and their kids. All of these people are gone except for the two youngest wives and the three little children they were able to grab as they ran. Two of the kids are hurt, and one of the women has had a heart attack, of all things. Bankole has treated her before. He says she was born with a heart defect that should have been taken care of when she was a baby. But she's only twenty, and around the time she was born, her family, like most people, had little or no money. They worked hard themselves and put the strongest of their kids to work at ages eight or ten. Their daughter's heart problem was always either going to kill her or let her live. It wasn't going to be fixed.

Now it had nearly killed her. Bankole was sleeping—or more likely staying awake—in the clinic room of the school tonight, keeping an eye on her and the two injured kids. Thanks to my hyperempathy syndrome, he can't have his

clinic here at the house. I pick up enough of other people's pain as things are, and he worries about it. He keeps wanting to give me some stuff that prevents my sharing by keeping me sleepy, slow, and stupid. No, thanks!

So I awoke alone, soaked with sweat, and unable to get back to sleep. It's been years since I've had such a strong reaction to a dream. As I recall, the last time was five years ago right after we settled here, and it was this same damned dream. I suppose it's come back to me because of the attack on Dovetree.

That attack shouldn't have happened. Things have been quieting down over the past few years. There's still crime, of course—robberies, break-ins, abductions for ransom or for the slave trade. Worse, the poor still get arrested and indentured for indebtedness, vagrancy, loitering, and other "crimes." But this thing of raging into a community and killing and burning all that you don't steal seems to have gone out of fashion. I haven't heard of anything like this Dovetree raid for at least three years.

Granted, the Dovetrees did supply the area with home-distilled whiskey and homegrown marijuana, but they've been doing that since long before we arrived. In fact, they were the best-armed farm family in the area because their business was not only illegal, but lucrative. People have tried to rob them before, but only the quick, quiet burglar-types have had any success. Until now.

I questioned Aubrey, the healthy Dovetree wife, while Bankole was working on her son. He had already told her that the little boy would be all right, and I felt that we had to find out what she knew, no matter how upset she was. Hell, the Dovetree houses are only an hour's walk from here down the old logging road. Whoever hit Dovetree, we could be next on their list.

Aubrey told me the attackers wore strange clothing, She and I talked in the main room of the school, a single, smoky oil lamp between us on one of the tables. We sat facing one another across the table, Aubrey glancing every now and then at the clinic room, where Bankole had cleaned and eased her child's scrapes, burns, and bruises. She said the attackers were men, but they wore belted black tunics—black dresses, she called them—which hung to their thighs. Under these, they wore ordinary pants—either jeans or the kind of camouflage pants that she had seen soldiers wear.

"They were like soldiers," she said. "They sneaked in, so quiet. We never saw them until they started shooting at us. Then, bang! All at once. They hit all our houses. It was like an explosion—maybe twenty or thirty or more guns going off all at just the same time."

And that wasn't the way gangs operated. Gangsters would have fired raggedly, not in unison. Then they would have tried to make individual names for themselves, tried to grab the best-looking women or steal the best stuff before their friends could get it.

"They didn't steal or burn anything until they had beaten us, shot us." Aubrey said. "Then they took our fuel and went straight to our fields and burned our crops. After that, they raided the houses and barns. They all wore big white crosses on their chests—crosses like in church. But they killed us. They even shot the kids. Everybody they found, they killed them. I hid with my baby or they would have shot him and me." Again, she stared toward the clinic room.

That killing of children…that was a hell of a thing. Most thugs—except for the worst psychotics—would keep the kids alive for rape and then for sale. And as for the

crosses, well, gangsters might wear crosses on chains around their necks, but that wasn't the sort of thing most of their victims would get close enough to notice. And gangsters were unlikely to run around in matching tunics all sporting white crosses on their chests. This was something new.

Or something old.

I didn't think of what it might be until after I had let Aubrey go back to the clinic to bed down next to her child. Bankole had given him something to help him sleep. He did the same for her, so I won't be able to ask her anything more until she wakes up later this morning. I couldn't help wondering, though, whether these people, with their crosses, had some connection with my current least favorite presidential candidate, Texas Senator Andrew Steele Jarret. It sounds like the sort of thing his people might do—a revival of something nasty out of the past. Did the Ku Klux Klan wear crosses—as well as burn them? The Nazis wore the swastika, which is a kind of cross, but I don't think they wore it on their chests. There were crosses all over the place during the Inquisition and before that, during the Crusades. So now we have another group that uses crosses and slaughters people. Jarret's people could be behind it. Jarret insists on being a throwback to some earlier, "simpler" time. Now does not suit him. Religious tolerance does not suit him. The current state of the country does not suit him. He wants to take us all back to some magical time when everyone believed in the same God, worshipped him in the same way, and understood that their safety in the universe depended on completing the same religious rituals and stomping anyone who was different. There was never such a time in this country. But these days when more than half the people in the country can't read at all, history is just one

more vast unknown to them.

Jarret supporters have been known, now and then, to form mobs and burn people at the stake for being witches. Witches! In 2032! A witch, in their view, tends to be a Moslem, a Jew, a Hindu, a Buddhist, or, in some parts of the country, a Mormon, a Jehovah's Witness, or even a Catholic. A witch may also be an atheist, a "cultist," or a well-to-do eccentric. Well-to-do eccentrics often have no protectors or much that's worth stealing. And "cultist" is a great catchall term for anyone who fits into no other large category, and yet doesn't quite match Jarret's version of Christianity. Jarret's people have been known to beat or drive out Unitarians, for goodness' sake. Jarret condemns the burnings, but does so in such mild language that his people are free to hear what they want to hear. As for the beatings, the tarring and feathering, and the destruction of "heathen houses of devil-worship," he has a simple answer: "Join us! Our doors are open to every nationality, every race! Leave your sinful past behind, and become one of us. Help us to make America great again." He's had notable success with this carrot-and-stick approach. *Join us and thrive, or whatever happens to you as a result of your own sinful stubbornness is your problem.* His opponent Vice President Edward Jay Smith calls him a demagogue, a rabble-rouser, and a hypocrite. Smith is right, of course, but Smith is such a tired, gray shadow of a man. Jarret, on the other hand, is a big, handsome, black-haired man with deep, clear blue eyes that seduce people and hold them. He has a voice that's a whole-body experience, the way my father's was. In fact, I'm sorry to say, Jarret was once a Baptist minister like my father. But he left the Baptists behind years ago to begin his own "Christian America" denomination. He no longer preaches regular CA sermons at CA churches or on the nets,

but he's still recognized as head of the church.

It seems inevitable that people who can't read are going to lean more toward judging candidates on the way they look and sound than on what they claim they stand for. Even people who can read and are educated are apt to pay more attention to good looks and seductive lies than they should. And no doubt the new picture ballots on the nets will give Jarret an even greater advantage.

Jarret's people see alcohol and drugs as Satan's tools. Some of his more fanatical followers might very well be the tunic-and-cross gang who destroyed Dovetree.

And we are Earthseed. We're "that cult," "those strange people in the hills," "those crazy fools who pray to some kind of god of change." We are also, according to some rumors I've heard, "those devil-worshiping hill heathens who take in children. *And what do you suppose they do with them?*" Never mind that the trade in abducted or orphaned children or children sold by desperate parents goes on all over the country and everyone knows it. No matter. The hint that some cult is taking in children for "questionable purposes" is enough to make some people irrational.

That's the kind of rumor that could hurt us even with people who aren't Jarret supporters. I've only heard it a couple of times, but it's still scary.

At this point, I just hope that the people who hit Dovetree were some new gang, disciplined and frightening, but only after profit. I hope.…

But I don't believe it. I do suspect that Jarret's people had something to do with this. And I think I'd better say so today at Gathering. With Dovetree fresh in everyone's mind, people will be ready to cooperate, have more drills and scatter more caches of money, food, weapons, records, and valuables. We can fight a gang. We've done that before

when we were much less prepared than we are now. But we can't fight Jarret. In particular, we can't fight *President* Jarret. President Jarret, if the country is mad enough to elect him, could destroy us without even knowing we exist.

We are now 59 people—64 with the Dovetree women and children, if they stay. With numbers like that, we barely do exist. All the more reason, I suppose, for my dream.

My "talent," going back to the parable of the talents, is Earthseed. And although I haven't buried it in the ground, I have buried it here in these coastal mountains, where it can grow at about the same speed as our redwood trees. But what else could I have done? If I had somehow been as good at rabble-rousing as Jarret is, then Earthseed might be a big enough movement by now to be a real target. And would that be better?

I'm jumping to all kinds of unwarranted conclusions. At least I hope they're unwarranted. Between my horror at what's happened down at Dovetree and my hopes and fears for my own people, I'm upset and at loose ends and, perhaps, just imagining things.

TWO

From EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING

Chaos
Is God's most dangerous face—
Amorphous, roiling, hungry.
Shape Chaos—
Shape God.
Act.

Alter the speed
Or the direction of Change.
Vary the scope of Change.
Recombine the seeds of Change.
Transmute the impact of Change.
Seize Change.
Use it.
Adapt and grow.

THE ORIGINAL 13 SETTLERS of Acorn, and thus the original 13 members of Earthseed, were my mother, of course, and Harry Balter and Zahra Moss, who were also refugees from my mother's home neighborhood in Robledo. There was Travis, Natividad, and Dominic Douglas, a young family who became my mother's first highway converts. She met them as both groups walked through Santa Barbara, California. She liked their looks, recognized their dangerous vulnerability—Dominic was only a few months old at the time—and convinced them

to walk with Harry, Zahra, and her in their long trek north where they all hoped to find better lives.

Next came Allison Gilchrist and her sister Julian—Allie and Jill. But Jill was killed later along the highway. At around the same time, my mother spotted my father and he spotted her. Neither of them was shy and both seemed witting to act on what they felt. My father joined the growing group. Justin Rohr became Justin Gilchrist when the group found him crying alongside the body of his dead mother. He was about three at the time, and he and Allie wound up coming together in another small family. Last came the two families of ex-slaves that joined together to become one growing family of sharers. These were Grayson Mora and his daughter Doe and Emery Solis and her daughter Tori.

That was it: four children, four men, and five women.

They should have died. That they survived at all in the unforgiving world of the Pox might qualify as a miracle—although of course, Earthseed does not encourage belief in miracles.

No doubt the group's isolated location—well away from towns and paved roads—helped keep it safe from much of the violence of the time. The land it settled on belonged to my father. There was on that land when the group arrived one dependable well, a half-ruined garden, a number of fruit and nut trees, and groves of oaks, pines, and redwoods. Once the members of the group had pooled their money and bought handcarts, seed, small livestock, hand tools, and other necessities, they were almost independent. They vanished into their hills and increased their numbers by birth, by adoption

of orphans, and by conversion of needy adults. They scavenged what they could from abandoned farms and settlements, they traded at street markets and traded with their neighbors. One of the most valuable things they traded with one another was knowledge.

Every member of Earthseed learned to read and to write, and most knew at least two languages—usually Spanish and English, since those were the two most useful. Anyone who joined the group, child or adult, had to begin at once to learn these basics and to acquire a trade. Anyone who had a trade was always in the process of teaching it to someone else. My mother insisted on this, and it does seem sensible. Public schools had become rare in those days when ten-year-old children could be put to work. Education was no longer free, but it was still mandatory according to the law. The problem was, no one was enforcing such laws, just as no one was protecting child laborers.

My father had the most valuable skills in the group. By the time he married my mother, he had been practicing medicine for almost 30 years. He was a multiple rarity for their location: well educated, professional, and Black. Black people in particular were rare in the mountains. People wondered about him. Why was he there? He could have been making a better living in some small, established town. The area was littered with tiny towns that would be glad to have any doctor. Was he competent? Was he honest? Was he clean? Could he be trusted looking after wives and daughters? How could they be sure he was really a doctor at all? My father apparently wrote nothing at all about this, but my mother wrote about everything.

She says at one point: "Bankole heard the same

whispers and rumors I did at the various street markets and in occasional meetings with neighbors, and he shrugged. He had us to keep healthy and our work-related injuries to treat. Other people had their first aid kits, their satellite phone nets, and, if they were lucky, their cars or trucks. These vehicles tended to be old and undependable, but some people had them. Whether or not they called Bankole was their business.

"Then, thanks to someone else's misfortune, things improved. Jean Holly's appendix flared up and all but ruptured, and the Holly family, our eastern neighbors, decided that they had better take a chance on Bankole.

"Once Bankole had saved the woman's life, he had a talk with the family. He told them exactly what he thought of them for waiting so long to call him, for almost letting a woman with five young children die. He spoke with that intense quiet courtesy of his that makes people squirm. The Hollys took it. He became their doctor.

"And the Hollys mentioned him to their friends the Sullivans, and the Sullivans mentioned him to their daughter who had married into the Gama family, and the Gamas told the Dovetrees because old Mrs. Dovetree —the matriarch—had been a Gama. That was when we began to get to know our nearest neighbors, the Dovetrees."

Speaking of knowing people, I wish more than ever that I could have known my father. He seems to have been an impressive man. And, perhaps, it would have been good for me to know this version of my mother, struggling, focused, but very young, very human. I might have liked these people.

FROM *The Journals of Lauren Oya Olamina*
MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 2032

I'm not sure how to talk about today. It was intended to be a quiet day of salvaging and plant collecting after yesterday's uncomfortable Gathering and determined anniversary celebration. We have, it seems, a few people who think Jarret may be just what the country needs—apart from his religious nonsense. The thing is, you can't separate Jarret from the "religious nonsense." You take Jarret and you get beatings, burnings, tarrings and featherings. They're a package. And there may be even nastier things in that package. Jarret's supporters are more than a little seduced by Jarret's talk of making America great again. He seems to be unhappy with certain other countries. We could wind up in a war. Nothing like a war to rally people around flag, country, and great leader.

Nevertheless, some of our people—the Peralta and Faircloth families in particular—might be leaving us soon.

"I've got four kids left alive," Ramiro Peralta said yesterday at Gathering. "Maybe with a strong leader like Jarret running things, they'll have a chance to stay alive."

He's a good guy, Ramiro is, but he's desperate for solutions, for order and stability. I understand that. He used to have seven kids and a wife. He'd lost three of his kids and his wife to a fire set by an angry, frightened, ignorant mob who decided to cure a nasty cholera epidemic down in Los Angeles by burning down the area of the city where they thought the epidemic had begun. I kept that in mind as I answered him. "Think, Ramiro," I said. "Jarret doesn't have any answers! How will lynching people, burning their churches, and starting wars help your kids to live?"

Ramiro Peralta only turned away from me in anger. He

and Alan Faircloth looked across the Gathering room—the school room—at one another. They're both afraid. They look at their children—Alan has four kids, too—and they're afraid and ashamed of their fear, ashamed of their powerlessness. And they're tired. There are millions of people like them—people who are frightened and just plain tired of all the chaos. They want someone to do something. Fix things. Now!

Anyway, we had a stormy Gathering and an uneasy anniversary celebration. Interesting that they fear Edward Jay Smith's supposed incompetence more than they fear Jarret's obvious tyranny.

So this morning, I was ready for a day of walking, thinking, and plant collecting with friends. We still travel in groups of three or four when we leave Acorn because the mountains, on the roads and off them, can be dangerous. But for nearly five months now, we've had no trouble while salvaging. I suppose, though, that that can be dangerous in itself. Sad. Raids and gangs are dangerous because they kill outright. Peace is dangerous because it encourages complacency and carelessness—which also kills sooner or later.

In spite of the Dovetree raid, we were, to be honest, more complacent than usual because we were heading for a place that we knew. It was a burned, abandoned farmhouse far from Dovetree where we'd spotted some useful plants. In particular, there was aloe vera for use in easing burns and insect bites, and there were big mounds of agave. The agave was a handsome, variegated species—blue-green leaves edged in yellow-white. It must have been growing and propagating untended for years in what was once the front yard of the farmhouse. It was one of the large, vicious varieties of agave, each individual plant an upturned rosette

of stiff, fibrous, fleshy leaves, some of them over a meter long in the big parent plants. Each leaf was tipped with a long, hard, dagger-sharp spike, and for good measure, each leaf was edged in jagged thorns that were tough enough to saw through human flesh. We intended to use them to do just that.

On our first visit, we had taken some of the smallest plants, the youngest offsets. Now we meant to dig up as many of the rest as we could bundle into our handcart. The cart was already more than half full of things we had salvaged from the rotting storage shed of a collapsed cabin a couple of miles from where the agave grew. We had found dusty pots, pans, buckets, old books and magazines, rusted hand tools, nails, log chains, and wire. All had been damaged by water and time, but most could be cleaned and repaired or cannibalized for parts or at least copied. We learn from all the work we do. We've become very competent makers and repairers of small tools. We've survived as well as we have because we keep learning. Our customers have come to know that if they buy from us, they'll get their money's worth.

Salvaging from abandoned gardens and fields is useful, too. We collect any herb, fruit, vegetable, or nut-producing plant, any plant at all that we know or suppose to be useful. We have, always, a special need for spiny, self-sufficient desert plants that will tolerate our climate. They serve as part of our thorn fence.

Cactus by cactus, thornbush by thornbush, we've planted a living wall in the hills around Acorn. Our wall won't keep determined people out, of course. No wall will do that. Cars and trucks will get in if their owners are willing to absorb some damage to their vehicles, but cars and trucks that work are rare and precious in the

mountains, and most fuels are expensive.

Even intruders on foot can get in if they're willing to work at it. But the fence will hamper and annoy them. It will make them angry, and perhaps noisy. It will, when it's working well, encourage people to approach us by the easiest routes, and those we guard 24 hours a day.

It's always best to keep an eye on visitors.

So we intended to harvest agave.

We headed for what was left of the farmhouse. It was built on a low rise overlooking fields and gardens. It was supposed to be our last stop before we went home. It came near to being our last stop, period.

There was an old gray housetruck parked near the ruin of the house. We didn't see the truck at first. It was hidden behind the larger of two chimneys that still stood like head and footstones, commemorating the burned house. I mentioned to Jorge Cho the way the chimneys looked. Jorge was with us because in spite of his youth, he's good at spotting useful salvage that other people might dismiss as junk.

"What are head and footstones?" he asked me. He meant it. He's 18 and an escapee from the Los Angeles area like I am, but his experience has been very different. While I was being cared for and educated by educated parents, he was on his own. He speaks Spanish and a little remembered Korean, but no English. He was seven when his mother died of flu and twelve when an earthquake killed his father. It collapsed the old brick building in which the family had been squatting. So at 12, Jorge alone was responsible for his younger sister and brother. He took care of them, somehow, and taught himself to read and write Spanish with occasional help from an old wino acquaintance. He worked at hard, dangerous, often illegal jobs; he salvaged; and

when necessary, he stole. He and his sister and brother, three Korean kids in a poor neighborhood of Mexican and Central American refugees, managed to survive, but they had no time to learn nonessentials. Now we're teaching them to read, write, and speak English because that will enable them to communicate with more people. And we're teaching them history, farming, carpentry, and incidental things—like what head and footstones are.

The other two members of the salvage team were Natividad Douglas and Michael Kardos. Jorge and I are sharers. Mike and Natividad aren't. It's too dangerous to send out a majority of sharers on any team. Sharers are too vulnerable. We suffer no matter who gets hurt. But two and two is a good team, and the four of us work well together. It's unusual for us all to be careless at the same time, but today, we managed it.

The fireplace and chimney that had concealed the truck from us had been the end wall of what was once a large living room. The fireplace was big enough to roast a whole cow. The whole affair was just big enough to conceal a medium-sized housetruck.

We saw the thing only an instant before it opened fire on us.

We were armed, as usual, with our automatic rifles and our sidearms, but against the armor and the firepower of even a modest housetruck, those were nothing.

We dropped to the ground under a spray of dirt and rock kicked up by bullets hitting the ground around us. We scrambled backward, down the rise on which the house was built. The crest of the rise was our only cover. All we could do was lie at the foot of its slope and try to keep all our body parts out of sight. We didn't dare stand or even sit up. There was nowhere for us to go. Bullets chewed the ground

in front of us, then behind us, beyond the protection of the rise.

There were no trees nearby—not even a large bush between us and the truck. We were in the thinnest part of the remains of a desert garden. We had not reached our agaves yet—could not reach them now. They couldn't have shielded us anyway. The only thing some of us might have at least concealed ourselves behind was a young, far-from-bulletproof young Washingtonia palm tree that we had passed on the way in. Its fronds were spread around it, low and green like a big bush, but it was at the north end of the house, and we were pinned down at the south end. The truck, too, was parked at the south end. The tree would be of no use to us. Nearest to us were a few aloe vera plants, a prickly pear, a small yucca, and a few weeds and tufts of grass.

None of these would do us any good. If the people in the truck had been making full use of their equipment, even the rise would not have done us any good. We would already be dead. I wondered how they had managed to miss us when we arrived. Were they just trying to scare us off? I didn't think so. The shooting had gone on for too long.

At last, it stopped.

We lay still, playing dead, listening for the whine of a truck engine, for footsteps, for voices, for any of the sounds that might tell us we were being hunted—or that our assailants had gone. There was only the low moan of the wind and the rustling of some of the plants. I lay, thinking about the pine trees that I had seen on the high ridge far behind the house. I could see them in my mind's eye, and somehow, it was all I could do to stop myself from raising my head to get a look at them, to see whether they were as far away as I thought they were. The weed-strewn fields of

what had been the farm swept back and up into the hills. Above them were the pines that could shelter and conceal, but they were far beyond our reach. I sighed.

Then we heard the sound of a child, crying.

We all heard it—a few short sobs, then nothing. The child sounded very young—not a baby, but young, exhausted, helpless, hopeless.

The four of us looked at one another. We all care about kids. Michael has two and Natividad has three. Bankole and I have been trying to have one. Jorge, I'm glad to say, hasn't made anyone pregnant yet, but he's been a surrogate father to his younger sister and brother for six years. He knows as well as the rest of us do what dangers lie in wait for unprotected children.

I raised my head just enough to get a quick look at the truck and the area around it. A housetruck, armed, armored, and locked up tight shouldn't—couldn't let the sound of a child's crying escape. And the sound had seemed normal, not amplified or modified by truck speakers.

Therefore, one of the truck's doors must be open. Wide open.

I couldn't see much through the weeds and grasses, and I didn't dare to raise my head above them. All I could make out were the sunlit shapes of the chimney, the truck beside it, the weeds in the fields behind both chimney and truck, the distant trees, and.…

Movement?

Movement far away in the weeds of the field, but coming closer.

Natividad pulled me down. "What is the matter with you?" she whispered in Spanish. For Jorge's sake, it was best to stay with Spanish while we were in trouble. "There are crazy people in that truck! Do you want to die?"

“Someone else is coming,” I said. “More than one person, coming through the fields.”

“I don’t care! Stay down!”

Natividad is one of my best friends, but sometimes having her along is like having your mother with you.

“Maybe the crying is intended to lure us out,” Michael said. “People have used children as lures before.” He’s a suspicious man, Michael is. He questions everything. He and his family have been with us for two years now, and I think it took him six months to accept us and to decide that we had no evil intentions toward his wife or his twin girls. This, even though we took them in and helped them when we found his wife alone, giving birth to the twins in a ruin of a shack where they had been squatting. The place was near a stream, so they had water, and they had a couple of scavenged pots. But they were armed only with an ancient, empty .22 target pistol and a knife. They were all but starving, eating pine nuts, wild plants, and an occasional small animal that Michael trapped or killed with a rock. In fact, he was away looking for food when his wife Noriko went into labor.

Michael agreed to join us because he was terrified that in spite of his odd jobs, begging, stealing, and scavenging, his wife and babies might starve. We never asked more of them than that they do their share of the work to keep the community going and that they respect Earthseed by not preaching other belief systems. But to Michael, this sounded like altruism, and Michael didn’t believe in altruism. He kept expecting to catch us selling people into slavery or prostituting them. He didn’t begin to relax until he realized that we were, in fact, practicing what we preached. Earthseed was and is the key to us. We had a way of life that he thought was sensible and a goal, a Destiny that he

thought was crazy, but we weren't up to anything that would harm his family. And his family was the key to him. Once he accepted us, he and Noriko and the girls settled in and made Acorn very much their home. They're good people. Even Michael's suspiciousness can be a good thing. Most of the time, it helps us keep alert.

"I don't think the crying was intended to lure us out," I said. "But something is wrong here. That's obvious. The people in that truck should either make sure we're dead or they should leave."

"And we shouldn't hear them," Jorge said. "No matter how loud that kid yells, we shouldn't hear a thing."

Natividad spoke up. "Their guns shouldn't have missed us," she said. "In a truck like that, the guns should be run by a computer. Automatic targeting. The only way you can miss is if you insist on doing things yourself. You might forget to put your guns on the computer or you might leave the computer off if you just wanted to scare people. But if you're serious, you shouldn't *keep* missing." Her father had taught her more about guns than most of the rest of our community knew.

"I don't think they missed us on purpose," I said. "It didn't feel like that."

"I agree," Michael said. "So what's wrong over there?"

"Shit!" Jorge whispered. "What's wrong is the bastards are going to kill us if we move!"

The guns went off again. I pressed myself against the ground and lay there, frozen, eyes shut. The idiots in the truck meant to kill us whether we moved or not, and their chances for success were excellent.

Then I realized that this time, they weren't shooting at us.

Someone screamed. Over the steady clatter of one of

the truck's guns, I heard someone scream in agony. I didn't move. When someone was in pain, the only way I could avoid sharing the suffering was not to look.

Jorge, who should have known better, raised his head and looked.

An instant later he doubled up, thrashing and twisting in someone else's agony. He didn't scream. Sharers who survive learn early to take the pain and keep quiet. We keep our vulnerability as secret as we can. Sometimes we manage not to move or give any sign at all. But Jorge hurt too much to keep his body still. He clutched himself, crossing his arms over his belly. At once, I felt a dull echo of his pain in my own middle. It is incomprehensible to me that some people think of sharing as an ability or a power—as something desirable.

"Fool," I said to Jorge, and held him until the pain passed from both of us. I concealed my own pain as best I could so that we wouldn't develop the kind of nasty feedback loop that I've learned we sharers are capable of. We don't die of the pains that we see and share. We wish we could sometimes, and there is danger in sharing too much pain or too many deaths. These are individual matters. Five years ago I shared three or four deaths fast, one after another. It hurt more than anything should be able to hurt. Then it knocked me out. When I came to, I was numb and sick and dazed long after there was any pain to share. With lesser pains, it's enough to turn away. In minutes, the pain is over for us. Deaths take much longer to get over.

The one good thing about sharing pain is that it makes us very slow to cause pain to other people. We hate pain more than most people do.

"I'm okay," Jorge said after a while. And then, "Those

guys out there…I think they're dead. They must be dead."

"They're down anyway," Michael whispered as he looked where Jorge had looked. "I can see at least three of them in the field beyond the chimney and the truck." He squirmed backward so that he could relax and no longer see or be seen over the rise. Sometimes I try to imagine what it must be like to look at pain and feel nothing. My current recurring nightmare is the closest I've come to that kind of freedom, not that it felt like freedom. But to Michael feeling nothing must be…well…normal.

Everything had gone quiet. The truck had not moved. It did nothing.

"They seem to need a moving target," I said.

"Maybe they're high on something," Natividad said. "Or maybe they're just crazy. Jorge, are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes. I just want to get the hell out of here."

I shook my head. "We're stuck here, at least until it gets dark."

"If the truck has even the cheapest night-vision equipment, the dark won't help us," Michael said.

I thought about that, then nodded. "Yes, but it shot at us and missed. And it hasn't moved, even though two sets of people have found its hiding place. I'd say either the truck or the people in it are not in good working order. We'll stay here until dark, then we'll run. If we're lucky, no one will wander in behind us before then and give us trouble or draw the truck's attention back this way. But whatever happens, we'll wait."

"Three people are dead," Michael said. "We should be dead ourselves. Maybe before the night is over, we will be."

I sighed. "Shut up, Mike."

We waited through the cool autumn day. We were lucky that two days before, the weather had turned cool.

We were also lucky that it wasn't raining. Perfect weather for getting pinned down by armed lunatics.

The truck never moved. No one else came along to trouble us or to draw fire. We ate the food we had brought along for lunch and drank what was left of our water. We decided that the trackers must think we were dead. Well, we were content to play dead until the sun had set. We waited.

Then we moved. In the dark, we began to crawl toward the northward edge of our cover. Moving this way, we hoped to put so much of the big chimney between ourselves and the truck that the people in the truck would not have time to see us and open fire before we got to better cover behind the second chimney. Once we reached the second chimney, we hoped to keep both chimneys between ourselves and the immobile truck as we escaped. That was fine as long as the truck remained immobile. If it moved, we were dead. Even if it didn't move, there would be a moment when we were easy targets, when we had to run across open ground.

"Oh god, oh god, oh god," Jorge whispered through clenched teeth as he stared at the stretch of open ground. If the truck managed to shoot anyone, and he saw it, he would collapse. So would I.

"Don't look around," I reminded him. "Even if you hear shots, look straight ahead, and run!"

But before we could start, the crying began again. There was no mistaking the sound. It was the open, uninhibited sobbing of a child, and this time, it didn't stop.

We ran. The sound of the crying might help to cover any sounds we made over the uneven ground—although we weren't noisy. We've learned not to be.

Jorge reached the smaller chimney first. I was next.

Then Michael and Natividad arrived together. Michael is short and lean and looks as quick as he is. Natividad is stocky and strong and doesn't look quick at all, but she tends to surprise people.

We all made it. There were no shots fired. And in the time it took us to reach the smaller chimney, I found that I had changed my mind about things.

The crying had not stopped or even paused. When I looked around the small chimney toward the truck, I could see light—a broad swatch of dim, blue-gray light. I couldn't see people, but it was clear that we had guessed right. A side door of the truck was wide open.

We were all bunched together at the smaller chimney, the others peering toward the down slope north of us. That was where they still expected to go. There was starlight enough to light the way, and I could see Jorge, bent down, his hands on his thighs as though he were about to run a race.

The child was not sobbing now, but wailing—a thin, exhausted sound. Best to move before the crying stopped. Also best to move before the others understood what I meant to do—what I now knew I had to do. They would follow me and back me up as long as I moved fast and didn't give them time to think or argue.

"Let's go," Michael said.

I paid no attention. There was, I realized, a bad smell in the air, swelling and fading in the evening breeze. It seemed to be coming from the truck.

"Come on," Michael urged.

"No," I said, and waited until all three of them had turned to look at me. Timing, now. "I want to see about that child," I said. "And I want that truck."

I moved then, just ahead of their restraining hands and

words.

I ran. I ran around the carcass of the house, shifting for an instant from reality into my dream. I was running past the stark ruin of a house, its chimneys, its few remaining black bones just visible against the stars.

Just for an instant, I thought I saw shadowy dream forms. Shadows rising, moving.…

I shook off the feeling and stopped as I reached the larger chimney. I edged around it, willing the truckers not to shoot me, terrified that they would shoot me, moving fast in spite of the terror.

The blue-gray light was brighter now, and the smell had become a sickening stench of rottenness that I found all too familiar.

I crouched low, hoping to be out of sight of the truck's cameras, and I crossed in front of the truck—near enough to it to put out my hand and touch it. Then I had reached the far side of it where the light was, where the door must be open.

As I went, I almost fell over the crying child. It was a little girl of perhaps six or seven. She was filthy beyond my ability to describe filthiness. She sat in the dirt, crying, reaching up to wipe away tears and rearrange some of the mud on her face.

She looked up and saw me just as I managed to stop myself from falling over her. She stared at me, her mouth open, as I swung past her to level my rifle into the blue-gray light of the truck's interior.

I don't know what I expected to see: Drunken people sprawled about? An orgy? More filth? People aiming their weapons at me? Death?

There was death nearby. I knew that. The smell was unmistakable.

What I did see in the blue-gray light was another child, another little girl, asleep at one of the truck's monitors. She had put her head down against the edge of the control board, and was snoring a little. The blue-gray light came from the three screens that were on. All three showed only gray, grainy electronic "snow."

There were also three dead people in the truck.

That is, I thought they must be dead. It was clear that all had been wounded—shot, I thought—several times. In fact, they must have been shot some time ago—days ago, perhaps. The blood on their bodies had dried and darkened.

I don't share any feeling with the unconscious or the dead, I'm glad to say. No matter how they look or smell, they don't bother me that much. I've seen too many of them.

I climbed into the truck, leaving the crying child outside to the care of the others. I could already hear Natividad talking to her. Natividad loves kids, and they seem to trust her as soon as they meet her.

Jorge and Michael had come up behind me as I climbed into the truck. Both froze as they saw the sleeping child and the sprawled bodies. Then Michael moved past me to check the bodies. He, Natividad, Allie Gilchrist, and Zahra Balter have learned to assist Bankole. They have no official medical or nurse training, but Bankole has trained them—is training them—and they're careful and serious about their work.

Michael checked the bodies and discovered that only one, a slender, dark, middle-aged man, was dead. He had been shot in the chest and abdomen. The other two were a big, naked, middle-aged, blond woman shot in the legs and thighs and a clothed blond boy of about 15 shot in the legs and left shoulder. These people were covered with dried

blood. Nevertheless, Michael found faint heartbeats in the woman and the boy.

"We've got to get them to Bankole," he said. "This is too much for me."

"Oh, shit," Jorge moaned, and he ran outside and threw up. I couldn't blame him. He had just noticed the maggots in the man's eyes, mouth, and wounds, and in the wounds of the other two. I looked away myself. All of us can deal with that kind of thing, but no one enjoys it. To tell the truth, I was more concerned about whether one or both of the wounded people would come to. I positioned myself so that I would not have to look at them. They were in no shape to attack us, of course, but they would drag me into their pain if they were conscious.

Keeping my back to Michael and his patients, I awoke the sleeping child. She wasn't quite as filthy as the little girl we'd found outside, but she did need a bath.

She squinted up at me, groggy, uncomprehending. Then she gave a little squeal and tried to dart past me, and out the door.

I caught her and held her while she struggled and screamed. I spoke to her, whispered to her, tried to reassure her, did all I could to bring her out of her hysteria. "It's all right, honey, it's all right. Don't cry. You'll be all right. We'll take care of you, don't worry. We'll take care of you…." I rocked her and crooned to her as though to a much younger child.

The dead and wounded were no doubt her family. She and the other child had been alone here with them for… how long? They would need all the care we could give them. After much more screaming and struggling, she began to take refuge in my arms, holding on to me instead of trying to escape. From my arms, she stared, huge-eyed, at

the others.

Jorge stood watch at the monitors once his stomach settled. Natividad had calmed the other little girl and found a clean cloth and some water. These she used to wash the child's face, hands, and arms. Michael had left the wounded woman and boy to examine the truck's controls. Of the four of us, he was the only one who knew how to drive.

"Any trouble?" I asked him.

He shook his head. "Not even any sign of boobytraps. I guess they would have worried about the kids springing them."

"Can you drive it?"

"No problem."

"Drive it, then. It's ours. Let's go home."

The truck was all right. There was plenty of power in its batteries, and Michael had no trouble finding and using its night-vision equipment. It carried infrared, ambient light, and radar devices. All of these were of good quality, and all worked. The little girls must not have understood how to use them—as they had not known how to drive. Or perhaps they had known how to operate everything, but had not known where to go with it. Who could little children go to for help, after all? If they had no adult relatives, even the police would either sell them illegally or indenture them legally. Indenturing indigents, young and old, is much in fashion now. The Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments—the ones abolishing slavery and guaranteeing citizenship rights—still exist, but they've been so weakened by custom, by Congress and the various state legislatures, and by recent Supreme Court decisions that they don't much matter. Indenturing indigents is supposed to keep them employed, teach them a trade, feed them, house them, and keep them

out of trouble. In fact, it's just one more way of getting people to work for nothing or almost nothing. Little girls are valued because they can be used in so many ways, and they can be coerced into being quick, docile, disposable labor.

No doubt these two girls have been taught to be terrified of strangers. Then, with their parents and brother out of action, they had been left on their own to defend their family and their home. In their blind fear, they had, they must have, shot at us and shot and hit three men who gave no sign of being anything worse than wanderers, perhaps salvagers. Michael and Natividad did go out to check on these men before we left while Jorge and I loaded our handcart and its contents onto the truck.

The three men were dead. They had hard currency and holstered guns—which Michael and Natividad collected. We covered them with rocks and left them. But they had been even less of a danger to the housetruck than we were. If they had walked right up to the truck, a locked door would have kept them out. Their old nine-millimeter semi-automatics would have had no chance against the truck's armor. But the little girls hadn't realized that.

We got them home to Acorn, and they're getting baths, food, comfort, and rest. Bankole is working on their mother and brother. He was not happy to have new patients. Our clinic has never been so full, and he has all his students and some volunteers helping him. He says he doesn't know whether he'll be able to save this new mother and son. He has a few simple instruments and an intricate little diagnostic unit that he saved when he fled his home in San Diego five years ago. And he has a few medicines—drugs to ease pain, fight infection, and otherwise keep us healthy. If the boy lives, Bankole doesn't know whether he'll walk again.

Bankole will do his best for them. And Allie Gilchrist and May are taking care of the little girls. The girls have been lucky, at least, in having us find them. They'll be safe with us.

And now, at last, we have something we've needed for years. We have a truck.

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 29, 2032

With all the work that my Bankole has had to do to help the wounded woman and boy and the wounded Dovetrees, he didn't get around to shouting at me over the truck incident until last night. And, of course, he didn't shout. He tends not to. It's a pity. His disapproval might be easier to take if it were quick and loud. It was, as usual, quiet and intense.

"It's a shame that so many of your unnecessary risks pay off so well," he said to me as we lay in bed last night. "You're a fool, you know. It's as though you think you can't be killed. My god, girl, you're old enough to know better."

"I wanted the housetruck," I said. "And I realized we might be able to get it. And we might be able to help a child. We kept hearing one of them crying."

He turned his head to look at me for several seconds, his mouth set. "You've seen children led down the road in convict collars or chains," he said. "You've seen them displayed as enticements before houses of prostitution. Are you going to tell me you did this because you heard one crying?"

"I do what I can," I said. "When I can do more, I will. You know that."

He just looked at me. If I didn't love him, I might not like him much at times like these. I took his hand and kissed

it, and held it. “I do what I can.” I repeated, “And I wanted the housetruck.”

“Enough to risk not only yourself, but your whole team —four people?”

“The risk in running away empty-handed was at least as great as the risk of going for the truck.”

He made a sound of disgust and withdrew his hand. “So now you’ve got a battered old housetruck,” he muttered.

I nodded. “So now we have it. We need it. You know we do. It’s a beginning.”

“It’s not worth anyone’s life!”

“It didn’t cost any of our lives!” I sat up and looked down at him. I needed to have him see me as well as he could in the dim light from the window. I wanted to have him know that I meant what I was saying. “If I had to die,” I said, “if I had to get shot by strangers, shouldn’t it be while I was trying to help the community, and not just while I was trying to run away?”

He raised his hands and gave me an ironic round of applause. “I knew you would say something like that. Well, I never thought you were stupid. Obsessed, perhaps, but not stupid. That being the case, I have a proposition for you.”

He sat up and I moved close to him and pulled the blankets up around us. I leaned against him and sat, waiting. Whatever he had to say, I felt that I’d gotten my point across. If he wanted to call my thinking obsessive, I didn’t care.

“I’ve been looking at some of the towns in the area,” he said. “Saylorville, Halstead, Coy—towns that are a few miles off the highway. None of them need a doctor now, but one probably will someday soon. How would you feel about living in one of those towns?”

I sat still, surprised. He meant it. Saylorville? Halstead?

Coy? These are communities so small that I'm not sure they qualify as towns. Each has no more than a few families and businesses huddled together between the highway—U.S. 101—and the sea. We trade at their street markets, but they're closed societies, these towns. They tolerate "foreign" visitors, but they don't like us. They've been burned too many times by strangers passing through—people who turned out to be thieves or worse. They trust only their own and long-established neighboring farmers. Did Bankole think that they would welcome us? Except for a larger town called Prata, the nearest towns are almost all White. Prata is White and Latino with a sprinkling of Asians. We're you name it: Black, White, Latino, Asian, and any mixture at all—the kind of thing you'd expect to find in a city. The kids we've adopted and the ones who have been born to us think of all the mixing and matching as normal. Imagine that.

Bankole and I, both Black, have managed to mix things up age-wise. He's always being mistaken for my father. When he corrects people, they wink at him or frown or grin. Here in Acorn, if people don't understand us, at least they accept us.

"I'm content here," I said. "The land is yours. The community is ours. With our work, and with Earthseed to guide us, we're building something good here. It will grow and spread. We'll see that it does. But for now, nothing in any of those towns is ours."

"It can be," he said. "You don't realize how valuable a physician is to an isolated community."

"Oh, don't I? I know how valuable you are to us."

He turned his head toward me. "More valuable than a truck?"

"Idiot," I said. "You want to hear praise? Fine. Consider yourself praised. You know how many of our lives you've

saved—including mine."

He seemed to think about that for a moment. "This is a healthy young group of people," he said. "Except for the Dovetree woman, even your most recent adoptees are healthy people who've been injured, not sick people. We have no old people." He grinned. "Except me. No chronic problems except for Katrina Dovetree's heart. Not even a problem pregnancy or a child with worms. Almost any town in the area needs a doctor more than Acorn does."

"They need any doctor. We need you. Besides, they have what they need."

"As I've said, they won't always."

"I don't care." I moved against him. "You belong here. Don't even think about going away."

"Thinking is all I can do about it right now. I'm thinking about a safe place for us, a safe place for you when I'm dead."

I winced.

"I'm an old man, girl. I don't kid myself about that."

"Bankole—"

"I have to think about it. I want you to think about it too. Do that for me. Just think about it."

THREE

From EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING

God is Change,
And in the end,
God prevails.
But meanwhile…
Kindness eases Change.
Love quiets fear.
And a sweet and powerful
Positive obsession
Blunts pain,
Diverts rage,
And engages each of us
In the greatest,
The most intense
Of our chosen struggles

FROM *Memories of Other Worlds*

I CANNOT KNOW WHAT the end will be of all of Olamina's dreaming, striving, and certainty. I cannot recall ever feeling as certain of anything as she seems to be of Earthseed, a belief system that she herself created—or, as she says, a network of truths that she has simply recognized. I was always a doubter when it came to religion. How irrational of me, then, to love a zealot. But then, both love and zealotry are irrational states of mind.

Olamina believes in a god that does not in the least

love her. In fact, her god is a process or a combination of processes, not an entity. It is not consciously aware of her—or of anything. It is not conscious at all. “God is Change,” she says and means it. Some of the faces of her god are biological evolution, chaos theory, relativity theory, the uncertainty principle, and, of course, the second law of thermodynamics. “God is Change, and, in the end, God prevails.”

Yet Earthseed is not a fatalistic belief system. God can be directed, focused, speeded, slowed, shaped. All things change, but all things need not change in all ways. God is inexorable, yet malleable. Odd. Hardly religious at all. Even the Earthseed Destiny seems to have little to do with religion.

“We are Earthseed,” Olamina says. “We are the children of God, as all fractions of the universe are the children of God. But more immediately we are the children of our particular Earth.” And within those words lies the origin of the Destiny. That portion of humanity that is conscious, that knows it is Earthseed, and that accepts its Destiny is simply trying to leave the womb, the Earth, to be born as all young beings must do eventually.

Earthseed is Olamina’s contribution to what she feels should be a species-wide effort to evade, or at least to lengthen the specialize-grow-die evolutionary cycle that humanity faces, that every species faces.

“We can be a long-term success and the parents, ourselves, of a vast array of new peoples, new species,” she says, “or we can be just one more abortion. We can, we must, scatter the Earth’s living essence—human, plant, and animal—to extrasolar worlds: ‘The Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars.’ ”

Grand words.

She hopes and dreams and writes and believes, and perhaps the world will let her live for a while, tolerating her as a harmless eccentric. I hope that it will. I fear that it may not.

My father has, in this piece, defined Earthseed very well and defined it in fewer words than I could have managed. When my mother was a child, protected and imprisoned by the walls of her neighborhood, she dreamed of the stars. Literally, at night she dreamed of them. And she dreamed of flying. I've seen her flying dreams mentioned in her earliest writings. Awake or asleep, she dreamed of these things. As far as I'm concerned, that's what she was doing when she created her Earthseed Destiny and her Earthseed verses: dreaming. We all need dreams—our fantasies—to sustain us through hard times. There's no harm in that as long as we don't begin to mistake our fantasies for reality as she did. It seems that she doubted herself from time to time, but she never doubted the dream, never doubted Earthseed. Like my father, I can't feel that secure about any religion. That's odd, considering the way I was raised, but it's true.

I've seen religious passion in other people, though—love for a compassionate God, fear of an angry God, fulsome praise and desperate pleading for a God that rewards and punishes. All that makes me wonder how a belief system like Earthseed—very demanding but offering so little comfort from such an utterly indifferent God—should inspire any loyalty at all.

In Earthseed, there is no promised afterlife. Earthseed's heaven is literal, physical—other worlds circling other stars. It promises its people immortality

only through their children, their work, and their memories. For the human species, immortality is something to be won by sowing Earthseed on other worlds. Its promise is not of mansions to live in, milk and honey to drink, or eternal oblivion in some vast whole of nirvana. Its promise is of hard work and brand-new possibilities, problems, challenges, and changes. Apparently, that can be surprisingly seductive to some people. My mother was a surprisingly seductive person.

There is an Earthseed verse that goes like this:

God is Change.
God is Infinite,
Irresistible,
Inexorable,
Indifferent.
God is Trickster,
Teacher,
Chaos,
Clay—
God is Change.
Beware:
God exists to shape
And to be shaped.

This is a terrifying God, implacable, faceless, yet malleable and wildly dynamic. I suppose it will soon be wearing my mother's face. Her second name was "Oya." I wonder whatever possessed my Baptist minister grandfather to give her such a name. What did he see in her? "Oya" is the name of a Nigerian Orisha—goddess—of the Yoruba people. In fact, the original Oya was the goddess of the Niger River, a dynamic, dangerous

entity. She was also goddess of the wind, fire, and death, more bringers of great change.

FROM *The Journals of Lauren Oya Olamina*
MONDAY, OCTOBER 4, 2032

Krista Noyer died today.

That was her name: Krista Koslow Noyer. She never regained consciousness. From the time we found her beaten, raped, and shot, lying naked in her family's housetruck, she's been in a deep coma. We've kept her and her wounded son in the clinic together. The five Dovetrees have moved in with Jeff King and his children, but it seemed best to keep Krista Noyer and her son at the clinic.

Zahra Baker and Allie Gilchrist helped to clean them up, then assisted Bankole when he removed five bullets from their bodies—two from the mother and three from the son. Zahra and Allie have been working with Bankole longer than Mike and Natividad have. They're not doctors, of course, but they know a lot. Bankole says he thinks they could function well as nurse practitioners now.

He, all four of his helpers, and others who gave volunteer nursing care did their best for the Noyers. After Krista Noyer's surgery, Zahra, Natividad, Allie, Noriko Kardos, Channa Ryan, and Teresa Lin took turns sitting with her, tending her needs. Bankole says he wanted women around her in case she came to. He thought the sight of male strangers would panic her.

I suspect that he was right. Poor woman.

At least her son was with her when she died. He lay on the bed next to hers, sometimes reaching out to touch her. They were only separated by one of our homemade privacy

screens when personal things had to be done for one of them. There was no screen between them when Krista died.

The boy's name is Danton Noyer, Junior. He wants to be called Dan. We burned the body of Danton Noyer, Senior, as soon as we got it back to Acorn. Now we'll have to burn his wife. We'll hold services for both of them when Dan is well enough to attend.

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 17, 2032

We had a double funeral today for Danton Noyer, Senior and his wife Krista.

Under Bankole's care, Dan Noyer is recovering. His legs and shoulder are healing, and he can walk a little. Bankole says he can thank the maggots for that. Not only did the disgusting little things keep his wounds clean by eating the dead tissue, but they did no harm. This particular kind have no appetite for healthy, living tissue. They eat the stuff that would putrefy and cause gangrene, then, unless they're removed, they metamorphose and fly away.

The little girls, Kassia and Mercy, had, at first, to be kept inside so that they would not run away. They had nowhere to go, but they were so frightened and confused that they kept trying to escape. When they were allowed to visit their brother they had to be kept from hurting him. They ran to him and would have piled onto his bed for reassurance and comfort if May and Allie had not stopped them. May seems best able to reach them. They seem to be adopting both women—and vice versa—but they seem to have a special liking for May.

She's something of a mystery, our May. I'm teaching her to write so that someday she'll be able to tell us her

story. She looks as though she might be a Latina, but she doesn't understand Spanish. She does understand English, but doesn't speak it well enough to be understood most of the time. That's because sometime before she joined us, someone cut out her tongue.

We don't know who did it. I've heard that in some of the more religious towns, repression of women has become more and more extreme. A woman who expresses her opinions, "nags," disobeys her husband, or otherwise "tramples her womanhood" and "acts like a man," might have her head shaved, her forehead branded, her tongue cut out, or, worst case, she might be stoned to death or burned. I've only heard about these things. May is the first example of it that I've ever seen—if she is an example. I'm glad to say her terrible wound had healed by the time she came to us. We don't even know whether May is her real name. But she can say, "May," and she's let us know we're to call her that. It's always been clear that she loves kids and gets along well with them. Now, with the little Noyer girls, it seems that she has a family. She's been sharing a cabin with Allie Gilchrist and Allie's adopted son Justin for the better part of a year. Now I suppose we'll have to either expand Allie's cabin or begin work on a new one. In fact, we need to begin work on two or three new ones. The Scolari family will be getting the next one. They've been cooped up with the Figueroas long enough. Then the Dovetrees, then the Noyers and May.

Dan Noyer is staying with Harry and Zahra Balter and their kids now that he's well enough to get around on his own a little. It seemed best to get him out of the clinic as soon as possible once his mother died. May is already sharing her one room with the two little girls, so Bankole looked for space for Dan elsewhere. The Balters

volunteered. Also, May's a sharer, and Dan still has bouts of pain. He doesn't complain, but May would notice. I do when I'm around him. There's no hyperempathy in the Balter family, so they can care for injured people without suffering themselves.

It's been a busy few weeks. We've done several salvage runs with the truck and gathered things we've never been able to gather in quantity before: lumber, stone, bricks, mortar, cement, plumbing fixtures, furniture, and pipe from distant abandoned ruins and from the Dovetree place. We'll need it all. We're 67 people now with the Noyer children. We're growing too fast.

And yet in another way, we're only creeping along. We're not only Acorn, we're Earthseed, and we're still only a single tiny hill community squeezed into too few cabins, and sharing an almost nineteenth-century existence. The truck will improve our comfort, but…it's not enough. I mean, it may be enough for Acorn, but it's not enough for Earthseed.

Not that I claim to know what would be enough. The thing that I want to build is so damned new and so *vast*! I not only don't know how to build it, but I'm not even sure what it will look like when I have built it. I'm just feeling my way, using whatever I can do, whatever I can learn to take one more step forward.

Here, for our infant Earthseed archives, is what I've learned so far about what happened to the Noyers. I've talked to Kassia and Mercy several times. And over the past three days, Dan has told me what he could remember. He seemed to need to talk, in spite of his pain, and with me around to complain to Bankole for him and see that he has his medicine when he needs it, he's had less pain. On his own,

he seems willing to just lie there and hurt. Well, there's nothing wrong with being stoic when you have to be, but there's enough unavoidable suffering in the world. Why endure it when you don't have to?

The Noyers had driven up from Phoenix, Arizona, where food and water are even more expensive than they are in the Los Angeles area. They sold their houses—they owned two—some vacant land, their furniture, Krista Noyer's jewelry, sold everything they could to get the money to buy and equip an armed and armored housetruck big enough to sleep seven people. The truck was intended to take the family to Alaska and serve as their home there until the parents could get work and rent or buy something better. Alaska is a more popular destination than ever these days. When I left southern California, Alaska was a popular dream—almost heaven. People struggled toward it, hoping for a still-civilized place of jobs, peace, room to raise their children in safety, and a return to the mythical golden-age world of the mid-twentieth century. They expected to find no gangs, no slavery, no free poor squatter settlements growing like cancers on the land, no chaos. There was to be plenty of land for everyone, a warming climate, cheap water, and many towns new and old, privatized and free, eager for hardworking newcomers. As I said, heaven.

If what I've heard from travelers is true, the few who've managed to get there—to buy passage on ships or planes or walk or drive hundreds, even thousands, of miles, then somehow sneak across the closed border with Canada to the also-closed Canadian-Alaskan border—have found something far less welcoming. And last year, Alaska, weary of regulations and restrictions from far away Washington, D.C., and even more weary of the hoard of hopeful paupers flooding in, declared itself an independent country. It

seceded from the United States. First time since the Civil War that a state's done that. I thought there might be another civil war over the matter, the way President Donner and Alaskan Governor—or rather, Alaskan *President*—Leontyev are snarling at one another. But Donner has more than enough down here to keep him busy, and neither Canada nor Russia, who have been sending us food and money, much liked the idea of a war right next door to them. The only real danger of civil war is from Andrew Steele Jarret if he wins the election next month.

Anyway, in spite of the risks, people like the Noyers, hopeful and desperate, still head for Alaska.

There were seven people in the Noyer family just a few days before we found the truck. There was Krista and Danton, Senior; Kassia and Mercy, our seven- and eight-year-old orphans; Paula and Nina, who were 12 and 13; and Dan, the oldest child. Dan is 15, as I guessed when I first saw him. He's a big, baby-faced, blond kid. His father was small and dark-haired. He inherited his looks and his size from his big, blond mother, while the little girls are small and dark like Danton, Senior. The boy is already almost two meters tall—a young giant with an oldest-child's enhanced sense of responsibility for his sisters. Yet he, like his father, had been unable to prevent Nina and Paula from being raped and abducted three days before we found the truck.

The Noyers had gotten into the habit of parking their truck in some isolated, sunny place like the south side of that burned-out farmhouse. There they could let the kids spend some time outside while they cleaned and aired the truck. They could unroll the truck's solar wings and spread them wide so that the sun could recharge their batteries. To save money, they used as much solar energy as possible. This meant driving at night and recharging during the day

—which worked all right because people walked on the highways during the day. It's illegal to walk on highways in California, but everyone does it. By custom now, most pedestrians walk during the day, and most cars and trucks run at night. The vehicles don't stop for anything that won't wreck them. I've seen would-be high-jackers run down. No one stops.

But during the day, they park to rest and refuel.

Danton and Krista Noyer kept their children near them, but didn't post a regular guard. They thought their isolation and general watchfulness would protect them. They were wrong. While they were busy with housekeeping, several men approached from their blind side—from the north—so that the chimney that had not quite hidden them had blocked their view. It was possible that these men had spotted the truck from one of the ridges, then circled around to attack them. Dan thought they had.

The intruders had rounded the wall and, an instant later, opened fire on the family. They caught all seven Noyers outside the truck. They shot Danton, Senior; Krista, and Dan. Mercy, who was nearest to the truck, jumped inside and hid behind a box of books and disks. The intruders grabbed the three other girls, but Nina, the oldest, created such a diversion with her determined kicking, biting, gouging, and struggling, breaking free, then being caught again, that Kassia, free for an instant, was able to slither away from her captor and scramble into the truck. Kassia did what Mercy had not. She slammed the truck door and locked it, locked all doors.

Once she had done that, she was safer than she knew. Intruders fired their guns into the truck's armor and tires. Both were marked, but not punctured, not much damaged at all. The intruders even built a fire against the side of the

truck, but the fire went out without doing damage.

After what seemed hours, the men went away.

The two little girls say they turned on the truck's monitors and looked around. They couldn't find the intruders, but they were still afraid. They waited longer. But it was terrible to wait alone in the truck, not knowing what might be happening just beyond the range of the monitors—on the other side of the chimney wall, perhaps. And there was no one to take care of them, no one for them to turn to. At last, staying in the truck alone was too much for them. They opened the door nearest to the sprawled bodies of their parents and big brother.

The intruders were gone. They had taken the two older girls away with them. Outside, Kassia and Mercy found only Dan and their parents. Dan had come to, and was sitting on the ground, holding his mothers head on his lap, stroking her face, and crying.

Dan had played dead while the intruders were there. He had given no sign of life, even when one of the intruders kicked him. Stoic, indeed. He heard them trying to get into the truck. He heard them cursing, laughing, shouting, heard two of his sisters screaming as he had never heard anyone scream. He heard his own heart beating. He thought he was dying, bleeding to death in the dirt while his family was murdered.

Yet he did not die. He lost consciousness and regained it more than once. He lost track of time. The intruders were there, then they were gone. He could hear them, then he couldn't. His sisters were screaming, crying, moaning, then they were silent.

He moved. Then gasping and groaning with pain, he managed to sit up. His legs hurt so as he tried to stand that he screamed aloud and fell down again. His mind, blurred

by pain, blood loss, and horror, he looked around for his family. There, near his legs, wet with his blood and her own was his mother.

He dragged himself to her, then sat holding her head on his lap. How long he sat here, all but mindless, he did not know. Then his little sisters were shaking him, talking to him.

He stared at them. It took him a long time to realize that they were really there, alive, and that behind them, the truck was open again. Then he knew he had to get his parents inside it. He had to drive them back down to the highway and into a town where there was a hospital, or at least a doctor. He was afraid his father might be dead, but he couldn't be sure. He knew his mother was alive. He could hear her breathing. He had felt the pulse in her neck. He had to get help for her.

Somehow, he did get them both into the truck. This was a long, slow, terrible business. His legs hurt so. He felt so weak. He had grown fast, and been proud of being man-sized and man-strong. Now he felt as weak as a baby, and once he had dragged his parents into the truck, he was too exhausted to climb into one of the driver's seats and drive. He couldn't get help for his parents or look for his two lost sisters. He had to, but he couldn't. He collapsed and lay on the floor, unable to move. His consciousness faded. There was nothing.

It was a familiar sort of story—horrible and ordinary. Almost everyone in Acorn has a horrible, ordinary story to tell.

Today we gave the Noyer children oak seedlings to plant in earth that has been mixed with the ashes of their parents. We do this in memory of our own dead, present

and absent. None of the ashes of my family are here, but five years ago when we decided to stay here, I planted trees in their memory. Others have done the same for their dead. Nina and Paula Noyer's ashes aren't here of course. Nina and Paula may not even be dead. But they will be remembered here along with their parents. Once Dan understood the ceremony, he asked for trees for Nina and Paula as well as for his parents.

He said, "Some nights I wake up still hearing them screaming, hearing those bastards laughing. Oh, god.…They must be dead. But maybe they're not. I don't know. Sometimes I wish I were dead. Oh god."

We've phoned our neighbors and friends in nearby towns about Nina and Paula Noyer. We've left their names, their descriptions (garnered from what Dan told me), and the offer of a reward in hard currency—Canadian money. I doubt that anything will come of it, but we have to try. It isn't as though we have an abundance of hard currency to spread around, but because we're so careful, we do have some. Because of the truck, we'll soon have more. To tell the truth, I'd try to buy the girls back even if there were no truck. It's one thing to know that there are children on the roads and in the towns being made to suffer for someone else's pleasure. It's another to know that the two sisters of children you know and like are being made to suffer. But there is the truck. All the more reason for us to do what we can for the Noyer children.

We brought Dan to the funeral services on a cot that we used as a stretcher. He can stand and walk. Bankole makes him do a little of that every day. But he's still not up to standing or sitting for long periods of time. We put him next to the slender young trees that Bankole planted five years ago in memory of his sister and her family, who had lived

on this property before us. They were murdered before we arrived. Their bodies were burned with their home. All we found of them were their charred bones and a couple of rings. These are buried beneath the trees just at the spot where Dan lay for the funeral.

The little girls planted their seedlings under our guidance, but not with our help. The work was done by their hands. Perhaps the planting of tiny trees in earth mixed with ashes doesn't mean much now, but they'll grow up knowing that their parents' remains are here, that living trees grow from those remains, and that today this community began to be their home.

We moved Dan's cot so that he could use the garden trowel and watering can, and we let him plant his own seedlings. He, too, did what he had to do without help. The ritual was already important to him. It was something he could do for his sisters and his parents. It was *all* he could do for them.

When he had finished, he said the Lord's Prayer. It was the only formal prayer he knew. The Noyers were nominal Christians—a Catholic mother, an Episcopalian father, and kids who had never seen the inside of a church.

Dan talked his sisters into singing songs in Polish—songs their mother had taught them. They don't speak Polish, which is a pity. I'm always glad when we can learn another language. No one in their family spoke Polish except Krista, who had come with her parents from Poland to escape war and uncertainty in Europe. And look what the poor woman had stepped into.

The girls sang their songs. As young as they were, they had clear, sweet voices. They were a delight to hear. Their mother must have been a good teacher. When they had finished, and all the seedlings were watered in, a few

members of the community stood up to quote from Earthseed verses, the Bible, The Book of Common Prayer, the Bhagavad-Gita, John Donne. The quotations took the place of the words that friends and family would have said to remember and give respect to the dead.

Then I said the words of the Earthseed verses that we've come to associate with funerals, and with remembering the dead. "God is Change," I began.

Others repeated in soft voices, "God is Change. Shape God." Habits of repetition and response have grown up almost without prompting among us. Sad to say, we've had so many funerals in our brief existence as a community that this ritual in particular is very familiar. Only last week, we planted trees and spoke words for the Dovetrees. I said,

"We give our dead
To the orchards
And the groves.
We give our dead
To life."

I paused, took a deep breath, and continued in slow measured tones.

"Death
Is a great Change—
Is life's greatest Change.
We honor our beloved dead.
As we mix their essence with the earth,
We remember them,
And within us,
They live."

“We remember,” the others whispered. “They live.” I stood silent for a moment, gazing out toward the tall persimmon, avocado, and citrus trees. Bankole’s sister and brother-in-law had planted these trees, had brought them as young plants from southern California, half expecting them to die here in a cooler climate. According to Bankole, many of them did die, but some survived as the climate changed, warmed. Old-timers among our neighbors complain about the loss of their fog, rain, and cool temperatures. We don’t mind, those of us from southern California. To us it’s as though we’ve come to a somewhat gentler version of the homes we were forced to leave. Here, there is still water, space, not too much debilitating heat, and some peace. Here, one can still have orchards and groves. Here, life can still come from death.

The little girls had gone back to sit with May. May hugged them, one small, dark-haired child in each arm, all three of them still, solemn, listening.

I began a new verse, almost a chant,

“Darkness
Gives shape to the light
As light
Shapes the darkness.
Death
Gives shape to life
As life
Shapes death.
God
And the universe
Share this wholeness
Each
Defining the other:

God
Gives shape to the universe
As the universe
Shapes God.”

And then, after a moment of silence, the last, the closing words:

“We have lived before
We will live again
We will be silk,
Stone,
Mind,
Star,
We will be scattered,
Gathered,
Molded,
Probed.
We will live,
And we will serve life.
We will shape God
And God will shape us
Again,
Always again
Forevermore.”

Some people whispered that last word—echoed it. Zahra quoted in a voice almost too soft to be heard,

“God is Change,
And in the end
God prevails.”

Her husband Harry put his arm around her, and I saw that her eyes were bright with unshed tears. She and Harry may be the most loyal, least religious people in the community, but there are times when people need religion more than they need anything else—even people like Zahra and Harry.

FOUR

From EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING

To shape God
With wisdom and forethought,
To benefit your world,
Your people,
Your life,
Consider consequences,
Minimize harm
Ask questions,
Seek answers,
Learn,
Teach.

FROM *Memories of Other Worlds*

OUR COAST REDWOOD TREES are dying.

Sequoia sempervirens is the botanical name for this tallest of all trees, but many are evergreen no longer. Little by little from the tops down, they are turning brown and dying.

I do not believe that they are dying as a result of the heat. As I recall, there were many redwoods growing around the Los Angeles area—Pasadena, Altadena, San Marino, places like that. I saw them there when I was young. My mother had relatives in Pasadena and she used to take me with her when she went to visit them. Redwoods growing that far south reached nothing like the height of

their kind here in the north, but they did survive. Later, as the climate changed, I suppose they died as so many of the trees down south died—or they were chopped down and used to build shelters or to feed the cooking fires of the homeless.

And now our younger trees have begun to die. This part of Humboldt County along the coast and in the hills—the local people call these coastal hills "mountains"—was cooler when I was a boy. It was foggy and rainy—a soft, green climate, friendly to most growing things. I believe it was already changing nearly 30 years ago when I bought the land that became Acorn. In the not-too-distant future, I suppose it will be little different from the way coastal southern California was a few decades ago—hot, semiarid, more brown than green most of the time. Now we are in the middle of the change. We still get a few substantial fall and winter storms each year, and there are still morning fogs in the spring and early summer.

Nevertheless, young redwood trees—those only about a century old, not yet mature—are withering. A few miles to the north and south of us in the old national and state parks, the groves of ancient giants still stand. A few hundred acres of them here and there have been released by the government, sold to wealthy, usually foreign interests, and logged. And squatters have cut and burned a number of individual trees, as usual, to build shelters and feed cooking fires, but the majority of the protected ones, millennia old, resistant to disease, fire, and climate change, still stand. If people let them alone, they will go on, childless, anachronistic, but still alive, still reaching futilely skyward.

My father, perhaps because of his age, seems to have been a loving pessimist. He saw little good in our

future. According to his writing, our greatness as a country, perhaps even the greatness of the human species, was in the past. His greatest desire seems to have been to protect my mother and later, to protect me —to somehow keep us safe.

My mother, on the other hand, was a somewhat reluctant optimist. Greatness for her, for Earthseed, for humanity always seemed to run just ahead of her. Only she saw it, but that was enough to entice her on, seducing her as she seduced others.

She worked hard at seducing people. She did it first by adopting vulnerable needy people, then by finding ways to make those people want to be part of Earthseed. No matter how ridiculous Earthseed must have seemed, with its starry Destiny, it offered immediate rewards. Here was real community. Here was at least a semblance of security. Here was the comfort of ritual and routine and the emotional satisfaction of belonging to a "team" that stood together to meet challenge when challenge came. And for families, here was a place to raise children, to teach them basic skills that they might not learn elsewhere and to keep them as safe as possible from the harsh, ugly lessons of the world outside.

When I was in high school, I read the 1741 Jonathan Edwards sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Its first few words sum up the kinds of lessons so many children were forced to learn in the world outside Acorn. Edwards said, "The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to

be cast into the fire." You're worthless. God hates you. All you deserve is pain and death. What a believable theology that would have been for the children of the Pox. No wonder, some of them found comfort in my mother's God. If it didn't love them, at least it offered them some chance to live.

If my mother had created only Acorn, the refuge for the homeless and the orphaned….If she had created Acorn, but not Earthseed, then I think she would have been a wholly admirable person.

FROM *The Journals of Lauren Oya Olamina*
SUNDAY, OCTOBER 24, 2032

Dan is much better. He's still limping, but he's healing fast. He sat through Gathering today for the first time. We held it indoors at the school because it's been raining—a good steady cold rain—for two days.

Dan sat through a welcoming and a discussion that his family's truck had helped to provoke. The welcoming was for Adela Ortiz's baby, Javier Verdugo Ortiz. Javier was the child of a brutal highway gang rape, and Adela, who came to us pregnant only seven months ago, had not known whether she wanted us to welcome him, had not even known whether or not she wanted to keep him. Then he was born and she said he looked like her long-dead younger brother, and she loved him at once, and couldn't think of giving him up and would we welcome him, please? Now we have.

Adela has no other family left, so several of us made little gifts for him. I made her a pouch that she can use to carry the baby on her back. Thanks to Natividad, who has

carried each of her babies that way, backpacking babies has become the custom for new mothers here at Acorn.

Adela chose Michael and Noriko to stand with her. They took their places on either side of her as the baby slept in her arms, and we filed past, each of us looking at Javier and giving him gentle, welcoming touches on each tiny hand and the black-haired head. He has the full head of hair of a much older child. Adela says her brother was that way too. She had helped to take care of her brother when he was a baby and now she feels very much that God has given him back to her. I know that when she talks about God, she doesn't mean what I mean. I'm not sure that matters. If she stays with us, obeys our rules, joins in our joys, sorrows, and celebrations, works alongside us, it doesn't matter. And in the future, when her son says "God," I think he will mean what I mean. These are the words of welcoming:

"Javier Verdugo Ortiz
We, your people
Welcome you.

We are Earthseed.

You are Earthseed—

One of many
One unique,
One small seed,
One great promise.
Tenacious of life,
Shaper of God,
Water,

Fire,
Sculptor,
Clay,
You are Earthseed!
And your Destiny,
The Destiny of Earthseed,
Is to take root
Among the stars."

They're good words. Not good enough to welcome a child into the world and into the community. No words are good enough to do that, and yet, somehow, words are needed. Ceremony is needed. As I spoke the words, the people sang them softly. Travis Douglas and Gray Mora have set several Earthseed verses to music. Travis can write music. Gray can hear it inside himself and then sing it to Travis.

When the words, the music, and the touching were over, when the Kardoses had accepted Adela as their sister and Javier as their nephew and Adela had accepted them, when all three had given their sworn promise before the community, Javier woke up wanting to nurse and Adela had to go back to her seat with him. Beautiful timing.

So many members of our community have come to us alone or with only little children that it seems best for me to do what I can to create family bonds that take in more than the usual godparent-godchild relationship. All too often, back in my old neighborhood in Robledo, that was no relationship at all. Aside from giving occasional gifts, people did not take it seriously. I want it taken seriously here. I've made that clear to everyone. No one has to take on the responsibility of joining in this way to another family, but anyone who does take that responsibility has made a real

commitment. The family relationship is not only with the new child, but with its parents as well. We are too young a community for me to say for sure how well this will work in the future, but people seem to accept it. We're used to depending on one another.

Once the welcoming was over, we moved on to the weekly discussion. Our Gatherings, aside from weddings, funerals, welcomings, or holiday celebrations, are discussions. They're problem-solving sessions, they're times of planning, healing, learning, creating, times of focusing, and reshaping ourselves. They can cover anything at all to do with Earthseed or Acorn, past, present, or future, and anyone can speak.

During the first Gathering of the month, I lead a looking-back-looking-forward discussion to keep us aware of what we've done and what we must do, taking in any necessary changes, and taking advantage of any opportunities. And I encourage people to think about how the things we do help us to sustain purposeful religious community.

This morning Travis Douglas wanted to talk about expanding our community business, a subject dear to my own heart. First he read his chosen Earthseed texts—verses that, like any good texts, could be used to start any number of different discussions.

> *"Civilization is to groups what intelligence is to individuals. Civilization provides ways of combining the information, experience, and creativity of the many to achieve ongoing group adaptability."*

And then,

> *“Any Change may bear seeds of benefit.*
> *Seek them out.*
> *Any Change may bear seeds of harm. Beware.*
> *God is infinitely malleable.*
> *God is Change.”*

“We have an opportunity that we have to take advantage of,” Travis said. “We have the truck, and we have no real competition. I’ve gone over the truck, and in spite of the way it looks, it’s in damned good shape. The solar wings just drink sunlight—really efficient. If we recharge the batteries during the day, we should save a bundle in fuel. For short trips there isn’t even any need to use anything but the batteries. We have the best vehicle in the area. We can do minor professional hauling. We can buy goods from our neighbors and sell them in the cities and towns. People will be glad to sell us their stuff for a little less if we’re the ones who do the work of getting it to market. And we can contract to grow crops for businesses in Eureka-Arcata, maybe down in Garberville.”

Several of us have talked about this off and on, but today was our first Gathering on the subject since we got the truck. Travis, more than most of us, wanted to risk becoming more involved with our neighbors. We could contract with them to buy the specific handicrafts, tools, and crops that they produce well. We know by now who’s good at what, who’s dependable, and who’s honest and sober at least most of the time.

Travis and I have already been asking around on our now more frequent trips to Eureka to see which merchants

night be interested in contracting to buy specific produce from us.

Travis cleared his throat and spoke to the group again. “With the truck,” he said, “only our first truck if we’re successful, we’ve got the beginnings of a wholesale business. Then, instead of depending only on what we can produce and instead of only bartering with near neighbors, we can grow a business as well as a community and a movement. It’s important that we become a self-sustaining economic entity or we’re liable never to move out of the nineteenth century!”

Well put, but not all that well received. We say “God is Change,” but the truth is, we fear change as much as anyone does. We talk about changes at Gathering to ease our fears, to desensitize ourselves and to consider consequences.

“We’re doing all right,” Allie Gilchrist said. “Why should we take on more risk? And why, when this guy Jarret is liable to win the election, should we draw attention to ourselves?” She had already lost her infant son and her sister. She had only her adopted son Justin, and she would do almost anything to protect him.

Michael surprised me. “We could do it, I suppose,” he said, and I waited for the “but.” There was bound to be one with Michael. He obliged. “But she’s right about Jarret. If he gets elected, the last thing we’ll need is higher visibility.”

“Jarret is down in the polls!” Jorge said. “His people are scaring everyone to death with their burning churches, burning people. He might not win.”

“Who the hell do they poll these days?” Michael asked, shaking his head. And then, “We’d better keep an eye on Jarret anyway. Win or lose, he’ll still have plenty of followers who are eager to create scapegoats.”

Harry spoke up. “We aren’t invisible now,” he said. “People in the nearby towns know us, know what we are—or they think they do. I want my kids to have a chance at decent lives. Maybe this wholesaling idea will be the beginning of that chance.”

Next to him, his wife Zahra nodded and said, “I’m for it too. We didn’t settle here just to grub in the ground and live in log huts. We can do better.”

“We might even improve things for ourselves with the neighbors,” Travis said, “if more people in the area know us, know that we can be trusted, it might be a little harder for a rabble-rouser like Jarret or one of his local clones to make trouble for us.”

I doubted that that would prove true—at least not on a large scale. We would meet more people, make more friends, and some of these would be loyal. The rest…well, the best we could hope for from them would be that they ignore us if we get into trouble. That might be the kindest gesture they could manage—to turn their backs and not join the mob. Others, whether we thought of them as friends or not, would be all too willing to join the mob and to stomp us and rob us if stomping and robbing became a test of courage or a test of loyalty to country, religion, or race.

On the other hand, making more of the right kinds of friends couldn’t hurt us. We’ve already made some that I trust—near neighbors, a couple of people in Prata, and a few more in Georgetown, the big squatter settlement outside Eureka. And the only way to make more good friends is to make more friends period.

Adela Ortiz spoke up in her quick, soft, little-girl voice. She’s only 16. “What if people think we’re cheating them?” she said. “People always think that. You know, like you’re trying to be nice to them and they just think everybody’s a

liar and a thief but them."

I was sitting near her, so I answered. "People will think whatever they like," I said. "It's our job to show by our behavior that we're not thieves, and we're not fools. We've got a good reputation so far. People know we don't steal. They know better than to steal from us. And they know we're neighborly. In emergencies, we help out. Our school is open to their kids for a little hard currency, and their kids are safe while they're here." I shrugged. "We've made a good start."

"And you think this wholesaling business is the way for us to go?" Grayson Mora asked.

I looked over at him with surprise. He sometimes manages to get through a whole Gathering without saying anything. He isn't shy at all, but he's quiet. He and his wife were slaves before they met. Each had lost family members to the effects and neglects of slavery. Now between them they have two girls and two boys. They're ferocious in guarding their children, and suspicious of anything new that might affect those children.

"I do," I said. I paused, glanced up at Travis who stood at the big handsome oak podium that Allie had built. Then I continued. "I believe we can do it as long as the truck holds up. You're our expert there, Travis. You've said the truck is in good shape, but can we afford to maintain it? What new, expensive part will it be needing soon?"

"By the time it needs anything expensive, we should be making more money," he said. "As of now, even the tires are good, and that's unusual." He leaned over the podium, looking confident and serious. "We can do this," he said. "We should start small, study the possibilities, and figure out how we should grow. If we do this right, we should be able to buy another truck in a year or two. We're growing.

We need to do this."

Beside me, Bankole sighed. "If we're not careful," he said, "our size and success will make us the castle on the hill—everyone's protector in this area. I don't think that's wise."

I do think it's wise, but I didn't say so. Bankole still can't see this place as anything more than a temporary stop on the way to a "real" home in a "real" town—that is, an already established town. I don't know how long it will take for him to see that what we're building here is as real and at least as important as anything he's likely to find in a town that's been around for a century or two.

I foresee a time when our settlement is not only "the castle on the hill," but when most or all of our neighbors have joined us. Even if they don't like every aspect of Earthseed, I hope they'll like enough of it to recognize that they're better off with us than without us. I want them as allies and as members, not just as "friends." And as we absorb them, I also intend to either absorb some of the storekeeper, restaurant, or hotel clients that we'll have—or I want us to open our own stores, restaurants, and hotels. I definitely want to begin Gathering Houses that are also schools in Eureka, Arcata, and some of the larger nearby towns. I want us to grow into the cities and towns in this natural, self-supporting way.

I don't know whether we can do all this, but I think we have to try. I think this is what a real beginning for Earthseed looks like.

I don't know how to do it. That scares me to death sometimes—always feeling driven to do something I don't know how to do. But I'm learning as I go along. And I've learned that I have to be careful how I talk about all this, even to Acorn. Bankole isn't the only one of us who doesn't

see the possibility of doing anything he hasn't seen done by others. And…although Bankole would never say this, I suspect that somewhere inside himself, he believes that large, important things are done only by powerful people in high positions far away from here. Therefore, what we do is, by definition, small and unimportant. This is odd, because in other ways, Bankole has a healthy ego. He didn't let self-doubt or the doubts of his family or the laughter of his friends stop him from going to college, and then medical school, surviving by way of a combination of scholarships, jobs, and huge debts. He began as a quietly arrogant Black boy of no particular distinction, and he ended as a physician.

But in a way, I suppose that's normal. I mean, it had been done before. Bankole himself had been taken to a Black woman pediatrician when he was a child.

What I'm trying to do isn't quite normal. It's been done. New belief systems have been introduced. But there's no standard way of introducing them—no way that can be depended on to work. What I'm trying to do is, I'm afraid, a crazy, difficult, dangerous undertaking. Best to talk about it only a little bit at a time.

Noriko, Michael's wife, spoke up. "I'm afraid for us to get involved in this new business," she said, "but I think we have to do it. This is a good community, but how long can it last, how long can it grow before we begin to have trouble feeding ourselves?"

People nodded. Noriko has more courage than she gives herself credit for. She can be shaking with fear, but she still does what she thinks she should do.

"We can grow or we can wither," I agreed. "That's what Earthseed is about on a larger scale, after all."

"I wish it weren't," Emery Mora said. "I wish we could

just hide here and stay out of everything else. I know we can't, but I wish.…It's been so good here." Before she escaped slavery, she'd had two young sons taken from her and sold. And she's a sharer. She and Gray and his daughter Doe and her daughter Tori and their sons Carlos and Antonio—all sharers. No other family is so afflicted. No other family has more reason to want to hide.

We talked on for a while, Travis listening as people protested, then either answering their protests or letting others answer them. Then he asked for a vote: Should we expand our business? The vote was "yes" with everyone over 15 voting. Only Allie Gilchrist, Alan Faircloth, Ramiro Peralta, and Ramiro's oldest daughter Pilar voted "no." Aubrey Dovetree, who couldn't vote because she was not yet a member, made it clear that she would have voted "no" if she could have.

"Remember what happened to us!" she said.

We all remembered. But we had no intention of trading in illegal goods. We're farther from the highway than Dovetree was, and we couldn't refuse this opportunity just because Dovetree had been hit.

We would expand our business, then. Travis would put together a team, and the team would talk to our neighbors —those without cars or trucks first—and talk to more merchants in the cities and towns. We need to know what's possible now. We know we can sell more at street markets because now with the truck we can go to more street markets. So even if we don't manage to get contracts at first, we'll be able to sell what we buy from our neighbors. We've begun.

When the Gathering was over, we shared a Gathering Day meal. We spread ourselves around the two large rooms of the school for food, indoor games, talk, and music. At the

front of the room near the podium, Dolores Figueroa Castro was planning to read a story to a group of small children who would sit at her feet. Dolores is Lucio's niece, Marta's daughter. She's only 12, but she likes reading to the younger kids, and since she reads well and has a nice voice, the kids like to listen. For the adults and older kids, we were to have an original play, written by Emery Mora, of all people. She's too shy to act, but she loves to write and she loves to watch plays. Lucio Figueroa has discovered that he enjoys staging plays, shaping fictional worlds. Jorge and a few others are hams and love acting in plays. Travis and Gray provide any needed music. The rest of us enjoy watching. We all feed one another's hungers.

Dan Noyer came over to me as I helped myself to fried rabbit, baked potato, a mix of steamed vegetables with a spicy sauce, and a little goat cheese. There were also pine nut cookies, acorn bread, and sweet potato pie. On Gathering Day, the rule is, we eat only what we've raised and prepared. There was a time when that was something of a hardship. It reminded us that we were not growing or raising as much as we should. Now it's a pleasure. We're doing well.

"Can I sit with you?" Dan asked.

I said, "Sure," then had to fend off several other people who wanted me to eat with them. Dan's expression made me think it was time for him and me to have some version of the talk that I always seem to wind up having with newcomers. I thought of it as the "What the hell is this Earthseed stuff, and do I have to join?" talk.

Right on cue, Dan said, "The Balters say my sisters and I can stay here. They say we don't have to join your cult if we don't want to."

"You don't have to join Earthseed," I said. "You and

your sisters are welcome to stay. If you decide to join us someday, we'll be glad to welcome you."

"What do we have to do—just to stay, I mean?"

I smiled. "Finish healing first. When you're well enough, work with us. Everyone works here, kids and adults. You'll help in the fields, help with the animals, help maintain the school and its grounds, help do some building. Building homes is a communal effort here. There are other jobs—building furniture, making tools, trading at street markets, scavenging. You'll be free to choose something you like. And you'll go to school. Have you gone to school before?"

"My folks taught us."

I nodded. These days, most educated poor or middle-class people taught their own children or did what people in my old neighborhood had done—formed unofficial schools in someone's home. Only very small towns still had anything like old-fashioned public schools. "You might find," I said, "that you know some things well enough to teach them to younger kids. One of the first duties of Earthseed is to learn and then to teach."

"And this? This Gathering?"

"Yes, you'll come to Gathering every week."

"Will I get a vote?"

"No vote, but you'll get a share of the profit from the sale of the crop, and from the other businesses if things work out. That's after you've been here for a year. You won't have a decision-making role unless you decide to join. If you do join, you'll get a larger share of the profit and a vote."

"It isn't really religious—your service, I mean. You guys don't believe in God or anything."

I turned to look at him. "Dan, of course we do."

He just stared at me in silent, obvious disbelief.

"We don't believe the way your parents did, perhaps, but we do believe."

"That God is Change?"

"Yes."

"I don't even know what that means."

"It means that Change is the one unavoidable, irresistible, ongoing reality of the universe. To us, that makes it the most powerful reality, and just another word for God."

"But…what can you do with a God like that? I mean… it isn't even a person. It doesn't love you or protect you. It doesn't know anything. What's the point?"

"The point is, it's the truth," I said. "It's a hard truth. Too hard for some people to take, but that doesn't make it any less true." I put my food down, got up, and went to one of our bookcases. There, I took down one of our several copies of *Earthseed: The First Book of the Living*. I self-published this first volume two years ago. Bankole had looked over my text when it was finished, and said I should copyright and publish for my own protection. At the time, that seemed unnecessary—a ridiculous thing to do in a world gone mad. Later, I came to believe he was right—for the future and for a reason in the present that Bankole had not mentioned.

"Things will get back to normal someday," he had said to me. "You should do this in the same way that we go on paying their taxes."

Things won't get back to what he calls normal. We'll settle into some new norm someday—for a while. Whether that new norm will recognize our tax paying or my copyright, I don't know. But there's a more immediate advantage to be had here.

People are still impressed, even intimidated, by bound, official-looking books. Verses, handwritten or printed out on sheets of paper just don't grab them the way a book does. Even people who can't read are impressed by books. The idea seems to be, "If it's in a book, maybe it's true," or even, "If it's in a book, it must be true." I went back to Dan, opened the book, and read to him,

"Do not worship God
Inexorable God
Neither needs nor wants
Your worship.
Instead,
Acknowledge and attend God,
Learn from God,
With forethought and intelligence,
Imagination and industry,
Shape God.
When you must,
Yield to God.
Adapt and endure.
For you are Earthseed,
And God is Change."

I paused, then said, "That's what we believe, Dan. That's what we strive to do—part of what we strive to do, anyway."

Dan listened, frowning. "I'm still not sure what all that means."

"You'll learn more about it in school. We say education is the most direct pathway to God. For now, it's enough to say that verse just means that flattering or begging God isn't

useful. Learn what God does. Learn to shape that to your needs. Learn to use it, or at least, learn to adapt to it so that you won't get squashed by it. That's useful."

"So you're saying praying doesn't work."

"Oh, no. Praying does work. Praying is a very effective way of talking to *yourself*, of talking yourself into things, of focusing your attention on whatever it is you want to do. It can give you a feeling of control and help you to stretch yourself beyond what you thought were your limits."

I paused, thinking of how well Dan had done just that when he tried to rescue his parents. "It doesn't always work the way we want it to," I said. "But it's always worth the effort."

"Even if when I pray, I ask God to help me?" he asked.

"Even so," I said. "You're the one your words reach and strengthen. You can think of it as praying to that part of God that's within you."

He thought about that for a while, then looked at me as though he had a big question, but hadn't yet decided how to ask it. He looked down at the book.

"How do you know you're right?" he asked at last. "I mean, that guy who wants to be President, that Jarret, he would call you all heathens or pagans or something."

Indeed, he would. "Yes," I said. "He does seem to enjoy calling people things like that. Once he's made everyone who isn't like him sound evil, then he can blame them for problems he knows they didn't cause. That's easier than trying to fix the problems."

"My dad says…" The boy stopped and swallowed. "My dad said Jarret's an idiot."

"I agree with your dad."

"But how do you know you're right?" he insisted. "How do you know Earthseed is true. Who says it's true?"

“You do, Dan.” I let him chew on that for a while, then went on. “You learn, you think, you question. You question us and you question yourself. Then, if you find Earthseed to be true, you join us. You help us teach others. You help others the way we’ve helped you and your sisters.” Another pause. “Spend some time reading this book. The verses are short and they mean what they say, although that may not be all that they mean. Read them and think about them. Then you can begin asking questions.”

“I’ve been reading;” he said. “Not this book, but other things. Nothing to do but read while I could hardly move. The Balters gave me novels and things. And…I’ve been thinking that I shouldn’t be here, living soft, eating good food, and reading books. I’ve been thinking that I ought to be out, looking for my sisters Nina and Paula. I’m the oldest, and they’re lost. I’m the man of the family now. I should be looking for them.”

That was the most alarming thing he had said so far. “Dan, we have no way of knowing—”

“Yeah. No one knows if they’re alive or where they are or if they’re still together….I know. I keep thinking about all that. But they’re my sisters. Dad and Mom always told me to look out for them.” He shook his head. “Hell, I didn’t even look out for Kassi and Mercy. If they hadn’t saved themselves, I guess we’d all be dead.” He shoved his dinner away in self-disgust. He had already eaten most of it. But because we were on a bench rather than at a table, there was little room for shoving things. His plate fell off onto the floor and broke.

He stared at it, tears in his eyes—tears that had nothing to do with broken china.

I reached for his hand.

He flinched away, then looked up from the plate and

stared at me through his tears.

I took his hand again, and looked back at him. “We have friends in some of the nearby towns,” I said. “We’ve already left word with them. We’re offering a reward for the girls or for information that leads us to them. If we can, we’ll snatch them. If we have to, we’ll buy them.” I sighed. “I can’t promise anything, Dan, but we’ll do what we can. And we need you to help us. Travel with us to street markets, stores, and shops in nearby communities. Help us to look for them.”

He went on staring at me as though I might be lying, as though he could find the truth in my face, if only he stared hard enough at it. “Why? Why would you do that?”

I hesitated, then drew a deep breath and told him. “We’ve all lost people,” I said. “Everyone here has lost members of their families to fire, to murder, to raids.…I had a father, a stepmother, and four younger brothers. All dead. All. When we can save life…we do. We couldn’t stand it any other way.”

And still, he stared at me. But now he was shaking. He made me think of a crystal thing, vibrating to sound, about to shatter. I pulled him to me, held him, this big child, taller than me. I felt his tears, wet on my shoulder, then felt his arms go around me, hugging back, still shaking, silent, desperate, hanging on.

FIVE

From EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING

Beware:
At war
Or at peace,
More people die
Of unenlightened self-interest
Than of any other disease.

THE SELECTIONS I'VE OFFERED from my mother's journal make it clear that in spite of her near nineteenth-century existence she paid attention to the wider world. Politics and war mattered very much. Science and technology mattered. Fashions in crime and drug use and in racial, ethnic, religious, and class tolerance mattered. She did see these as fashions, by the way—as behaviors that went in and out of favor for reasons that ran the gamut from the practical to the emotional to the biological. Human competitiveness and territoriality were often at the root of particularly horrible fashions in oppression. We human beings seem always to have found it comforting to have someone to took down on—a bottom level of fellow creatures who are very vulnerable, but who can somehow be blamed and punished for all or any troubles. We need this lowest class as much as we need equals to team with and to compete against and superiors to look to for direction and help.

My mother was always noticing and mentioning things like that. Sometimes she managed to work her observations into Earthseed verses. In November of 2032 she had bigger reasons than usual to pay attention to the world outside.

FROM *The Journals of Lauren Oya Olamina*
SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 2032

News.

Tucked away at Acorn as we are, we have to make a special effort to get news from outside—real news, I mean, not rumors, and not the "news bullets" that purport to tell us all who we need to know in flashy pictures and quick, witty, verbal one-two punches. Twenty-five or thirty words are supposed to be enough in a news bullet to explain either a war or an unusual set of Christmas lights. Bullets are cheap and full of big dramatic pictures. Some bullets are true virtuals that allow people to experience—safely—hurricanes, epidemics, fires, and mass murder. Hell of a kick.

Well-made news disks, on the other hand, or good satellite news services cost more. Gray and Emery Mora and one or two others say news bullets are enough. They say detailed news doesn't matter. Since we can't change the stupid, greedy, vicious things that powerful people do, they think we should try to ignore them. No matter how many times we're forced to admit we can't really hide, some of us still find ways to try.

Well, we can't hide. So it's best to pay attention to what goes on. The more we know, the better able we'll be to survive. So we subscribe to a good phone news service and

now and then we buy detailed world-news disks. The whole business makes me long for free broadcast radio like the kind we had when I was a kid, but that's almost nonexistent in this area. We listen to what little is left when we go into one of the larger towns. We can hear more now because the truck's radio picks up more than our little pocket radios can.

So here are some of the most significant news items of the past week. We listened to some of them on a new Worldisk today after Gathering.

Alaska is still claiming to be an independent nation, and it seems to have gotten into an even closer more formal alliance with Canada and Russia—northerners sticking together I suppose. Bankole shrugged when he heard that and shook his head. "Why not?" he said. "They've got all the money."

Thanks to climate change, they do have most of it. The climate is still changing, warming. It's supposed to settle at a new stable state someday. Until then, we'll go on getting a lot of violent erratic weather around the world. Sea level is still rising and chewing away at low-lying coastal areas like the sand dunes that used to protect Humboldt Bay and Arcata Bay just north of us. Half the crops in the Midwest and South are still withering from the heat, drowning in floods, or being torn to pieces by winds, so food prices are still high. The warming has made tropical diseases like malaria and dengue normal parts of life in the warm, wet Gulf Coast and southern Atlantic coast states. But people are beginning to adapt. There's less cholera, for instance, and less hepatitis. There are fewer of all the diseases that result from bad sanitation, spoiled food, or malnutrition. People boil the water they drink in cities where there's a problem and in squatter settlements with their open sewers—ditches. There are more gardens, and old-fashioned skills in food

preservation are being revived. People barter for goods and services where cash is rare. They use hand tools and draft animals where there is no money for fuel or no power equipment left. Life is getting better, but that won't stop a war if politicians and business people decide it's to their advantage to have one.

There are plenty of wars going on around the world now.

Kenya and Tanzania are fighting. I haven't yet heard why. Bolivia and Peru are having another border dispute. Pakistan and Afghanistan have joined forces in a religious war against India. One part of Spain is fighting against another. Greece and Turkey are on the edge of war, and Egypt and Libya are slaughtering one another. China, like Spain, is tearing at itself. War is very popular these days.

I suppose we should be grateful that there hasn't been another "nuclear exchange." The one three years ago between Iran and Iraq scared the hell out of everyone. After it happened, there must have been peace all over the world for maybe three months. People who had hated one another for generations found ways to talk peace. But insult by insult, expediency by expediency, cease-fire violation by cease-fire violation, most of the peace talks broke down. It's always been much easier to make war than to make peace.

Back in this country, in Dallas, Texas, some fool of a rich boy went adventuring among the free poor of a big squatter settlement. He wound up wearing the latest in electronic convict control devices—also known as slave collars, dog collars, and choke chains. And with the collar to encourage him, he learned to make himself useful to a local pimp. I've heard that the new collars are damned sophisticated. The old ones—worn more often as belts—could only cause pain. They delivered shocks and sometimes

damaged or killed people. The new collars don't kill, and they can be worn for months or years at a time and used often to deliver punishment. They're programmed to resist being removed or destroyed by delivering jolts of pain severe enough to cause unconsciousness. I've heard that some collars can also give cheap, delicious rewards of pleasure for good behavior by encouraging changes in brain chemistry—stimulating the wearer to produce endorphins. I don't know whether that's true, but if it is, the whole business sounds a little like being a sharer—except that instead of sharing what other people feel, the wearer feels whatever the person holding the control unit wants him to feel. This could initiate a whole new level of slavery. After a while, needing the pleasure, fearing the pain, and always being desperate to please the master could become a person's whole life. I've heard that some collared people kill themselves, not because they can't stand the pain, but because they can't stand the degree of slavishness to which they find themselves descending.

The Texas boy's father spent a lot of money. He hired private cops—the kind who'll do anything if you pay them enough—and they sliced through the squatter camp as though it were a ripe melon until they found the boy. And with that, bingo! Slavery was discovered in Texas in 2032. Innocent people—not criminals or indigents—were being held against their wills and used for immoral purposes! How about that! What I'd like to see is a state of the union where slavery isn't being practiced.

Here's another news item. On the planet Mars, living, multicellular organisms have been discovered…sort of. They're very small and very strange inside, although outside they look like tiny slugs…some of the time. They live at least four meters down in certain polar rock formations, and

they're not exactly animals. They're a little like Terrestrial slime molds. And, like slime molds, they go through independent single-celled stages during which they eat their way through the rocks, multiplying by dividing, resembling little antifreeze-filled amoeba. When they've exhausted the food supply in their immediate neighborhoods, they unite into sluglike multicellular masses to travel to new sites where the minerals they ingest are available. They don't reproduce in their slug form as Terrestrial slime molds do. They seem to need the slug form only to produce enough of their corrosive antifreeze solution to enable them to migrate through rock to a fresh supply of food. They make soil in two ways. They eat minerals, pass these through their bodies, and shed a dust so fine and so slippery that, like graphite, it can work as a kind of lubricant. And they ooze through the rocks in their slug form, their corrosive slime dissolving trails, cracks, and making more dust.

These creatures are living Martians! So far, though, all the specimens captured and examined at Leal Station died soon after being taken from their cold, rocky home. For that reason and others, they are both a great discovery and a great sadness. They are the last discoveries that will be made by scientists working for the U.S. Government.

President Donner has sold the last of our Mars installations to a Euro-Japanese company, in fulfillment of one of his earliest campaign promises. The idea is that all nonmilitary space travel, manned and unmanned, should be privatized. "If it's worth doing at all," Donner said, "it should be done for profit, and not as a burden on the taxpayers." As though profit could be counted only as immediate financial gain. I was born in 2009, and for as long as I can remember, I've heard people complaining about the space program as a waste of money, and even as

one of the reasons for the country's deterioration.

Ridiculous! There is so much to be learned from space itself and from the nearby worlds! And now we've found living extraterrestrials, and we're going to quit. I suppose that if the Martian "slime molds" can be used for something—mining, perhaps, or chemistry—then they'll be protected, cultivated, bred to be even more useful. But if they prove to be of no particular use, they'll be left to survive or not as best they can with whatever impediments the company sees fit to put in their paths. If they're unlucky enough to be bad for business in some way—say they develop a taste for some of the company's building materials—they'll be lucky to survive at all. I doubt that Terrestrial environmental laws will protect them. Those laws don't even really protect plant and animal species here on Earth. And who would enforce such laws on Mars?

And yet, somehow, I'm glad our installations have been sold and not just abandoned. Selling them was bad, but it was the lesser evil. Most people wouldn't have minded seeing them abandoned. They say we have no business wasting time or money in space when there are so many people suffering here on Earth, here in America. I wonder, though, where the money received in exchange for the installations has gone. I haven't noticed any new government education or jobs programs. There's been no government help for the homeless, the sick, the hungry. Squatter settlements are as big and as nasty as ever. As a country, we've given up our birthright for even less than bread and pottage. We've given it up for nothing—although I'm sure some people somewhere are richer now.

Consider, though: a brand-new form of life has been discovered on Mars, and it got less time on the news disk than the runaway Texas boy. We're becoming more and

more isolated as a people. We're sliding into undirected negative change, and what's worse, we're getting used to it. All too often, we shape ourselves and our futures in such stupid ways.

More news. Scientists in Australia have managed to bring a human infant to term in an artificial womb. The child was conceived in a petri dish. Nine months later, it was taken, alive and healthy, from the last in a series of complex, computer-controlled containers. The child is the normal son of parents who could not have conceived or borne a child without a great deal of medical help.

Reporters are already calling the womb containers "eggs," and there's some foolish popular argument over whether a "hatched" person is as human as a "normally born" person. There are ministers and priests arguing that this tampering with human reproduction is wrong, of course. I doubt that they'll have much to worry about for a while. The whole process is still experimental and would be available only to the very rich if it were being marketed to anyone—which it isn't, yet. I wonder whether it will catch on at all in this world where so many poor women are willing to serve as surrogate mothers, carrying to term the child of wealthier people even when the wealthy people are able to have a child in the normal way. If you're rich, you can have a surrogate for not much more than the price of feeding and housing her for nine months. If she's smart and you're generous, you might also wind up agreeing to feed, house, and help educate her children. And you might give her husband a job. Channa Ryan's mother did this kind of work. According to Channa, her mother bore 13 surrogate children, none of them genetically related to her. Her marriage didn't survive, but her two genetic daughters were given a chance to learn to read and write, cook, garden, and

sew. That isn't enough to know in this world, of course, but it's more than most poor people learn.

It will be a long while—years, decades perhaps—before human surrogates are replaced by computerized eggs. Consider, though: eggs combined with cloning technology (another toy of the rich) would give men the ability to have a child without the genetic or the gestational help of a woman. Such men would still need a woman's ovum, stripped of its genetic contents, but that would be all. If the idea caught on, they might be willing to use the ovum of some animal species.

And, of course, women will be free to do without men completely, since women can provide their own ova. I wonder what this will mean for humanity in the future. Radical change or just one more option among the many?

I can see artificial wombs being useful when we travel into extrasolar space—useful for gestating our first animals once they're transported as frozen embryos and useful for gestating children if the nonreproductive work of women settlers is needed to keep the colony going. In that way, perhaps the eggs may be good for us—for Earthseed—in the long run. But what they'll do to human societies in the meantime, I wonder.

I've saved the worst news item for last. The election was on Tuesday, November 2. Jarret won. When Bankole heard the news, he said, "May God have mercy on our souls." I find that I'm more worried about our bodies. Before the election I told myself that people had more sense than to elect a man whose supporters burn people alive as "witches," and torch the churches and homes of people they don't like.

We all voted—all of us who were old enough—and most of us voted for Vice President Edward Jay Smith. None

of us wanted an empty man like Smith in the White House, but even a man without an idea in his head is better than a man who means to lash us all back to his particular God the way Jesus lashed the money changers out of the temple. He used that analogy more than once.

Here are some of the things that Jarret said back when he was shouting from his own Church of Christian America pulpit. I have copies of several of his sermons on disk.

"There was a time, Christian Americans, when our country ruled the world," he said. "America was God's country and we were God's people and God took care of his own. Now look at us. Who are we? What are we? What foul, seething, corrupt heathen concoction have we become?

"Are we Christian? Are we? Can our country be just a little bit Christian and a little bit Buddhist, maybe? How about a little bit Christian and a little bit Hindu? Or maybe a country can be a little bit Christian and a little bit Jewish? How about a little bit Christian and a little bit Moslem? Or perhaps we can be a little bit Christian and a little bit pagan cultist?"

And then he thundered, "We are God's people, or we are filth! We are God's people, or we are nothing! We are God's people! God's people!

"Oh my God, my God, why have we forsaken thee?

"Why have we allowed ourselves to be seduced and betrayed by these allies of Satan, these heathen purveyors of false and unchristian doctrines? These people…these pagans are not only wrong. They're dangerous. They're as destructive as bullets, as contagious as plagues, as poisonous as snakes to the society they infest. They kill us, Christian American brothers and sisters. They kill us! They rouse the righteous anger of God against us for our misguided generosity to them. They are the natural destroyers of our

country. They are lovers of Satan, seducers of our children, rapists of our women, drug sellers, usurers, thieves, and murderers!

"And in the face of all that, what are we to them? Shall we live with them? Shall we let them continue to drag our country down into hell? Think! What do we do to weeds, to viruses, to parasitic worms, to cancers? What must we do to protect ourselves and our children? What can we do to regain our stolen nation?"

Nasty. Very nasty. Jarret was the junior senator from Texas when he preached the sermon that contained those lines. He never answered the questions he asked. He left that to his listeners. And yet he says he's against the witch burnings.

His speeches during the campaign have been somewhat less inflammatory than his sermons. He's had to distance himself from the worst of his followers. But he still knows how to rouse his rabble, how to reach out to poor people, and sic them on other poor people. How much of this nonsense does he believe, I wonder, and how much does he say just because he knows the value of dividing in order to conquer and to rule?

Well, now he's conquered. In January of next year, he'll be sworn in, and he'll rule. Then, I suppose we'll see just how much of his own propaganda he believes.

Another, happier, more local event happened here at Acorn yesterday. Lucio Figueroa, Zahra Balter, and Jeff King came in with a huge load of books for our library. Some look almost new. Others are old and worn, but they've all been protected from the weather, from water, and from fire. There are textbooks, up to graduate level in several subjects, specialized dictionaries, a set of encyclopedias—2001

edition—books of history, how-to books, and dozens of novels. Jeff King ran across the books being all but given away at a street market in Arcata.

"Someone was clearing out a room so that relatives could move into it," he told me. "The owner of the books had died. He was considered the family eccentric, and no one else in the household shared his enthusiasm for reading big, bulky books made of paper. I didn't think you'd mind my buying them for the school."

"Mind?" I said. "Of course not!"

"Lucio said he wasn't sure we should spend the money, but Zahra said you were crazy for more books. I figured she'd know."

I grinned. "She knows. I thought everyone knew."

There were fifteen boxes of books. We took them into the school, and today we recovered as best we could from the stuff on the Worldisk by looking through the books and shelving them. We read bits of this and that to one another. People got excited and interested, and everyone carried away a book or two to read. After hearing the news, we all needed to read something that wasn't depressing.

I wound up with a couple of books on drawing. I haven't tried to draw anything since I was seven or eight. Now, all of a sudden, I find myself interested in learning to draw, learning to draw well—if I can. I want to learn something new and unrelated to any of our troubles.

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 2032

I'm pregnant!

No surrogates, no computerized eggs, no drugs. Bankole and I did it the good old-fashioned way—at last!

It's crazy that it should happen now, just when America has elected a wild man to lead it. Bankole and I began trying as soon as we could see that we were going to survive here at Acorn. Bankole's first wife couldn't have children. As a young woman back in the 1990s, she was in a serious car accident and wound up with a hysterectomy, among other things. Bankole claimed he never minded. He said the world was going to hell just as fast as it could, and it would be an act of cruelty to bring a child into it. They talked about adopting, but never did.

Now he's going to be a father, and in spite of all his talk, he's almost jumping up and down—that is, whenever he isn't being scared to death. He's talking about moving into an established town again. He hadn't said anything about that since right after we got the truck, but now the subject is back, and he's serious. He wants to protect me. I realize that. I suppose I should be glad he feels that way, but I wish he would show his protective feelings in another way.

"You're a kid yourself," he said to me. "You don't have the sense to be afraid."

I can't seem to get angry with him for saying things like that. He says them, then he thinks for a moment, and if he doesn't watch himself, he begins to grin like a boy. Then he remembers his fears and looks panicked. Poor man.

SIX

From EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING

God is Change
And hidden within Change
Is surprise, delight,
Confusion, pain,
Discovery, loss,
Opportunity, and growth.
As always,
God exists
To shape
And to be shaped.

IT'S A GOOD THING, I suppose, that my mother's God was Change. Her life had a way of changing in abrupt, important ways. I don't suppose she was really any more prepared for sudden changes than anyone else, but her beliefs helped her cope with them, even take advantage of them when they came.

I enjoyed reading about the way she and my father reacted to my conception. Such mismatched people, yet such a normal reaction. She couldn't know that she was in for other major changes even before she could get used to being pregnant.

FROM *The Journals of Lauren Oya Olamina*
SUNDAY, DECEMBER 5, 2032

Spokesmen for Christian America have announced that the Church will be opening homeless shelters and children's homes—orphanages—in several states, including California, Oregon, and Washington. This is just a beginning, they say. They hope in time to "extend a helping hand to the people of every state in the union, including Alaska." I heard this on a newsdisk that Mike Kardos bought at a Garberville street market yesterday. Time to begin to clean up the Christian America image, I suppose. I just hope the California shelters and orphanages will be put where they're most needed—down around San Diego, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. I don't want them up here. Christian America is made up of scary people, and I find it impossible to believe that they intend only to do good and to help others.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2032

Today I found my brother Marcus.

This is impossible, I know, but I found him. He's sick, fearful, confused, and angry—but he's alive!

I found him in Eureka, California, although five years ago, down in Robledo, he died.

I don't know what to say about this. I don't know how to deal with it. Writing about it helps. Somehow, writing always helps.

Before dawn this morning, five of us drove into Eureka. Bankole needed medical supplies and we had a couple of deliveries of winter vegetables and fruit to make to small, independent stores who have already begun to buy our produce. After that, we had a special errand.

Bankole hadn't wanted me to come. He worries about

me more than ever now, and he's always after me to move to an established town. We could have a nice little house and he could be town doctor. We could live nice empty little antique lives, and I could forget I've spent the past five years struggling to establish Acorn as the beginning of Earthseed. Now that we've got the truck, traveling is a lot less dangerous than it used to be, but my Bankole is more worried than ever.

And, to tell the truth, there are still things to worry about. We've all been looking over our shoulders since Dovetree. But we've got to live. We've got work to do.

"So Acorn is safe now?" I said to Bankole. "I'll be safe if I stay there?"

"Safer than you are traveling all over the county," he muttered, but he knew me well enough to let it go. At least he would be along to keep an eye on me.

Dan Noyer would also be along because our special errand concerned him. On our way home we were going to meet with a man who had contacted us through friends in Georgetown, claiming that he had one of Dan's younger sisters, and that he would sell her to us. The man was a pimp, of course—"a livestock man, specializing in lamb and chicken" as one of the euphemisms went. That is, a man who puts slave collars on little children and rents their bodies to other grown men. I hate the idea of having anything to do with a slug like that, but he was exactly the kind of walking filth who would have Nina and Paula Noyer.

I had asked Travis and Natividad Douglas to come along with us, to ride shotgun, and in Travis's case, to fix the truck if anything went wrong with it. I've trusted them both more than once with my life. I trust their judgment and their ability to fight. I felt a need to have people like

that behind me when I was dealing with a slaver.

We made our deliveries to the two independent markets early, as we had promised—produce from our fields and from what was left of Dovetree's huge kitchen garden and small grove of fruit trees. The Dovetree truck and farm tractor had both been stolen during the raid that destroyed Dovetree. The houses and outbuildings had been torched along with the stills and fields. But a number of fruit trees and garden crops survived. Since the five surviving Dovetrees have decided to stay with us—to join us as members of Earthseed once their required probationary year has ended—we've felt free to take what we could from the property. The two Dovetree women have relatives elsewhere in the mountains, but they don't much like them, and they don't want to be squeezed into crowded houses with them. They do get along with us, and they know that while they're crowded now, they will have their own cabin by the time they're Welcomed as members.

Of course, they could go back and live on their own land. But two women and three children wouldn't survive on their own. They wouldn't survive alone even in a place as hidden and protected as Acorn. Trying to live right off the highway at Dovetree, they would be enslaved or killed in no time. Any home or farm that can be seen from the highway is bound to be tempting to the desperate and the opportunistic, and now the fanatical. Dovetree as it was survived because the family was large, well armed, and had a reputation for toughness. That worked until a small, determined army came along. The attackers really were Jarret loyalists, by the way. They came from the Eureka-Arcata area, from the new Christian America churches that have sprung up there. They have no government-sanctioned authority, but they believe God is on their side, and the

cleansing work they do is God's work. Somehow, this kind of thing doesn't tend to make it to the news nets or disks. I've picked it up by talking to people. I know a few good sources of local news.

Bankole bought his supplies next. They're the most expensive things we buy, but they're also the most necessary. We are, as Bankole says, a healthy, young community, but the world around us isn't healthy. Thanks to malnutrition, climate change, poverty, and ignorance, a lot of old diseases are back, and some of them are contagious. There was an outbreak of whooping cough in the Bay Area last winter, and it came up the highway as far north as Ukiah down in Mendocino County. Why it stopped there, I don't know. And there was rabies last summer. Several people in squatter camps were bitten by rabid dogs or rats. They died of it, and a couple of teenagers were shot because they pretended to have rabies just to scare people. Whatever money it costs to keep us healthy, it's worth it.

When our business in Eureka was finished, we went to meet the slaver at the place he and I had agreed on, just south and east of Eureka in Georgetown. The squatter settlement called Georgetown extends well back from the highway in coastal hills. The place is a human-made desert, dusty when the weather is dry, muddy when it rains, almost treeless, plantless, filled with the poorest of the poor and their open sewers, their malnutrition, their drugs, crime, and disease. Bankole says it was once a beautiful area of farms, trees, and hills. That must have been a long time ago. The settlement is called Georgetown because the most permanent-looking thing in it is a cluster of shabby-looking redwood buildings. They're on a flattened hilltop and can be seen from just about everywhere in the settlement. There's a store, a café, a games hall, bar, a hotel, a fuel station, and a

repair shop where tools, guns, and vehicles of all kinds might be restored to usefulness. The whole complex is called George's, and is run by a huge family surnamed George. At the café, George's has a lot of rentable cubbyhole mailboxes where packages and paper messages can be left, and there's a big bank of pay phones where, for a serious fee, you can access almost any network, service, group, or individual. This service in particular has made the place a combination message center, meeting place, and Old West saloon. It's natural to arrange to meet people there to transact business of all kinds. Elroy George and his sons, his sons-in-law, his brothers, and his brothers' sons see to it that people behave themselves. The Georges are a formidable tribe. They stick together, and people respect them. Their prices are high, but they're honest. You get what you pay for with the Georges. Sad to say some of the things that get paid for in the café or elsewhere at the complex are slaves and drugs. The Georges aren't slavers, but they've been known to handle drugs. I wish that weren't so, but it is. I just hope they don't go the way of the Dovetrees. They're stronger and more entrenched, and better connected politically than the Dovetrees, but who knows? Now that Jarret has been elected, who knows?

Dolores Ramos George, the matriarch of the tribe, runs the store and the café and she knows everyone. She's got a reputation for being a hard, mean woman, but as far as I'm concerned, she's just a realist. She speaks her mind. I like her. She's one of the people with whom I left word about the Noyer girls. When she heard the story, she just shook her head. "Not a chance," she said. "Why didn't they keep a watch? Some parents got no sense at all."

"I know," I said. "But I have to do what I can—for the sake of the other three kids."

“Yeah.” She shrugged. “I’ll tell people. It won’t do no good.”

But now it looked as though it had done some good. And in thanks, I had brought Dolores a basket of big navel oranges, a basket of lemons, and a basket of persimmons. If we found one or both of the Noyer girls as a result of her spreading the word, I would owe her a percentage of the reward—a kind of finder’s fee. But it seemed wise to make sure she came out ahead, no matter what.

“Beautiful, beautiful fruit,” she said, smiling as she looked at it and handled it. She was a stout, old-looking 53, but the smile took years off her. “Around here, if you don’t guard a fruit tree and shoot a couple of people to prove you mean it, they’ll tear off all the fruit, then cut down the tree for firewood. I won’t let my boys kill people to save trees and plants, but I really miss oranges and grapes and things.”

She called some of her young grandchildren to come and take the fruit into the house. I saw the way the kids were looking at everything, so I warned them not to eat the persimmons until they were soft to the touch. I cut one of the hard ones up and let each child have a taste of it so they would all know just how awful something so pretty could taste before it was ripe. Otherwise, they would have ruined several pieces of fruit as they tried to find a tasty, ripe persimmon. Just yesterday, I caught the Dovetree kids doing that back at Acorn. Dolores just watched and smiled. Anyone who was nice to her grandkids could be her friend for life—as long as they didn’t cross the rest of her family.

“Come on,” she said to me. “The shit pile that you want to talk with is stinkin’ up the café. Is this the boy?” She looked up at Dan, seeming to notice him for the first time. “Your sister?” she asked him.

Dan nodded, solemn and silent.

“I hope she’s the right girl,” she said. Then she glanced at me, looked me up and down. She smiled again. “So you’re finally starting a family. It’s about time! I was 16 when I had my first.”

I wasn’t surprised. I’m only two months along, and not showing at all yet. But she would notice, somehow. No matter how distracted and grandmotherly she can seem when she wants to, she doesn’t miss much.

We left Natividad in the housetruck, on watch. There are some very efficient thieves hanging around Georgetown. Trucks need guarding. Travis and Bankole went into the café with Dan and me, but Dan and the two men took a table together off to one side to back me up in case anything unexpected happened between the slaver and me. People didn’t start trouble inside George’s Café if they were sensible, but you never knew when you were dealing with fools.

Dolores directed us to a tall, lean, ugly man dressed completely in black, and working hard to look contemptuous of the world in general and George’s Café in particular. He wore a kind of permanent sneer.

He sat alone as we had agreed, so I went over to him alone and introduced myself. I didn’t like his dry, papery voice or his tan, almost yellow eyes. He used them to try to stare me down. Even his smell repelled me. He wore some aftershave or cologne that gave him a heavy, nasty, sweet scent. Honest sweat would have been less offensive. He was bald, clean-shaved, beak-nosed, and so neutral-colored that he could have been a pale-skinned Black man, a Latino, or a dark-skinned White. He wore, aside from his black pants and shirt, an impressive pair of black leather boots—no expense spared—and a wide heavy leather belt decorated with what I first thought were jewels. It took me a moment

to realize that this was a control belt—the kind of thing you use when you're moving around a lot and controlling several people through slave collars. I had never seen one before, but I'd heard descriptions of them.

Hateful bastard.

"Cougar," he said.

Crock of shit, I thought. But I said, "Olamina."

"The girl's outside with some friends of mine."

"Let's go see her."

We walked out of the café together, followed by my friends and his. Two guys sitting at the table off to his right got up when he did. It was all a ridiculous dance.

Outside, near the big, mutilated, dead stump of a redwood tree, several kids waited, guarded by two more men. The kids, to my surprise, looked like kids. They were not made up to look older or, for that matter, younger. The boys—one looked no older than 10—wore clean jeans and short-sleeved shirts. Three of the girls wore skirts and blouses, and three wore shorts and T-shirts. All the jeans were a little too tight, and the skirts were a little too short, but none were really worse than things free kids of the same ages wore.

The slaves were clean and they looked alert and wary. None of them looked sick or beaten, but they all kept an eye on Cougar. They looked at him as he emerged from the café, then looked away so that they could watch him without seeming to. They weren't really good at this yet, so I couldn't help noticing. I looked around at Dan, who had followed us out with Bankole and Travis. Dan looked at the slave kids, stopped for a second as his gaze swept over the older girls, then shook his head.

"None of them are her," he said. "She's not here!"

"Hold on," Cougar said. He tapped his belt and four

more kids came around the great trunk of the tree—two boys and two girls. These were a little older—mid-to-late teens. They were beautiful kids—the most beautiful I had ever seen. I found myself staring at one of them.

Somewhere behind me, Dan was whimpering, “No, no, she’s still not here! Why did you say she was here? She’s not!” He sounded much younger than his 15 years.

And I heard Bankole talking to him, trying to calm him, but I stood frozen, staring at one of the boys—a young man, really. The young man stared back at me then looked away. Perhaps he had not recognized me. On the other hand, perhaps he was warning me. I was late taking the warning.

“Like that one, do you?” Cougar purred.

Shit.

“He’s one of my best. Young and strong. Take him instead of a girl.”

I made myself look at the girls. One of them did look like the description we had given out of Dan’s sisters: small, dark-haired, pretty, 12 and 13 years old. Nina had a scar just at the hairline where she had been burned when she was four and she and Paula and Dan had found some matches to play with. Some of her hair had caught fire. Paula had a mole—she called it a beauty mark—on the left side of her face near her nose. The girl that Cougar hoped we would buy did have a scar just at the hairline like Nina. She even resembled little Mercy Noyer quite a bit. Same heart-shaped face.

“Did she say she was Nina Noyer?” I asked Cougar.

He grinned. “Can’t talk,” he said. “Can’t write either. Best kind of female. She must have said something bad to somebody, though, back when she could talk. Because before I bought her, somebody cut her tongue off.”

I didn’t let myself react, but there was no way I could

avoid thinking of our May back at Acorn. We still don't know whose work this tongue cutting is, but we know that some Christian America types would be happy to silence all women. Jarret preached that woman was to be treasured, honored, and protected, but that for her own sake, she must be silent and obey the will of her husband, father, brother, or adult son since they understood the world as she did not. Was that it? The woman could be silent or she could be silenced? Or was it simpler than that—some pimp in the area just liked cutting out women's tongues? I didn't believe Cougar had done it. There was nothing about his body language that said he was lying or being evasive. That might just mean he was a very good liar, but I didn't think so. It seemed to me that he was telling the truth because he didn't care. He didn't give a damn who had cut the girl or why. I did. I couldn't help it. How much more of this kind of mutilation would we be seeing?

The beautiful young man moved his feet in a restless, noisy way, dragging my attention back to him. Not that I was in any danger of forgetting him. And he was the one I had to buy now.

"How much for him?" I asked. It was too late to pretend I wasn't interested. I had all I could do to just keep functioning—speaking sensible words in normal tones of voice, pretend that the impossible was not in the process of happening.

"Buying, are we?" asked Cougar, smirking.

I turned to face him. "I came here to buy," I said. In fact, I would chance making an enemy of the Georges and kill Cougar if I had to. I would not leave my brother in this man's hands. The thought that I had to leave any of these kids in his hands was sickening.

"I hope you can afford him," Cougar said. "Like I told

you, he's one of my best."

I haven't had to do much haggling in my life, but something occurred to me as Cougar and I began. "He looks like one of your oldest," I said. My brother Marcus would be almost 20 now. How old did one of Cougar's child-slaves have to be before he was too old?

"He's 17!" Cougar lied.

I laughed and told a lie of my own. "Maybe five or six years ago he was 17. Good god, man, I'm not blind! He's great-looking, but he's no kid." It amazed me that I could lie and laugh and behave as though nothing unusual were happening when my long-dead brother stood alive and well just a few meters away.

To my further amazement, we haggled for over an hour. It seemed to me to be the right thing to do. Cougar was in no hurry, and I took my cue from him. He even seemed to be enjoying himself some of the time. Everyone else sat around on the ground, waiting, and looking bored or confused and angry. My people were the confused, angry ones. Dan in particular looked first disbelieving, then disgusted, then furious. But he followed the example of the two men. He kept quiet. He sat staring at the ground, his face expressionless. Travis watched me, then looked from me to Bankole, trying to figure out what was going on. But he wouldn't ask in front of Cougar. Bankole maintained a perfect poker face. Later, the three of them would have a lot to say to me. But not now.

And Cougar did want to get rid of Marcus. Maybe it was Marcus's age, maybe something else, but I couldn't miss that veiled eagerness of his. What he said just didn't jibe with his body language. I think being a sharer makes me extra sensitive to body language. Most of the time, this is a disadvantage. It forces me to feel things that I don't want to

feel. Psychotics and competent actors can cause me a lot of trouble. This time, though, my sensitivity was a help.

I bought my brother. No shooting, no fighting, not even much cussing. In the end, Cougar smirked, took his hard currency, and released Marcus from the slave collar. He had offered me the collar and a control unit too—at added cost. Of course I didn't want it. Filthy things.

"Nice doin' business with you," Cougar said.

No. It hadn't been nice at all. "I still want the Noyer girls," I said.

He nodded. "I'll keep my eyes open. That young one over there is a real good fit to the description you gave."

I turned to Dan. "Is she…anything like your sisters?"

The girl and Dan stared at one another, and it hit me again that I was going to have to walk away and leave these children to their pimp. I avoided looking at the girl.

"Yeah, she looks a little like Nina," Dan mumbled. "But what good is that? She's not Nina. What good is anything?"

"Can you tell him anything more that would help him recognize either of your sisters if he sees them?" I asked.

"I don't want him to recognize them." Dan turned to stare at Cougar. "I don't want him to touch them. I'd kill him! I swear I would!"

Bankole took him to the truck, and Travis, in spite of his confusion, followed with Marcus. I went back into George's and took care of Dolores. She hadn't found Dan's sister, but she had done me a favor that I would never have imagined anyone could do. She had more than earned her fee.

As for Dan I couldn't really blame him for his attitude. But we couldn't afford a fight now. I was too close to my own edge. Leaving the rest of the kids, especially the little ones, was horrible. I had been willing to fight for Marcus if I

had to, but I might have gotten him and others killed. I would have gotten someone killed. I don't know how to stop people like Cougar, but I don't think killing off their victims, their human property, is the best way.

Inside the truck, I hugged my brother. He was as unresponsive as a stick at first, but after a moment he held me away from him and stared at me for at least a full minute. He didn't say anything. He just shook his head. Then he hugged me. After a while, he put his hand to his throat. He felt all around his neck where the damned collar had been. Then he just kind of curled up on himself. He lay on his side in fetal position, and I sat beside him. He flinched when I touched him, so I just sat there.

And I told the others. "He's my brother," I said. "I…for five years, I believed…that he was dead." And then I couldn't say anything more. I just sat with him. I don't know what the others did apart from keeping watch and driving us home. If they talked, I didn't hear them. I didn't care what they did.

In all, Bankole told me, my brother had three active venereal infections. Also, his upper back and shoulders, his left arm, and the outside of his left leg were covered with an ugly network of old burn scars. No wonder Cougar had wanted to get rid of him. He probably thought he'd cheated me, palmed a defective off on me. Someone might once have done the same to him. Marcus was so good-looking that Cougar might have been persuaded to buy him in a rush without stripping him to look him over. But Marcus had suffered terrible burns sometime in the past, and Bankole said he had been shot, too.

When Bankole had finished examining him, he gave him something to help him sleep. That seemed best. Marcus had not objected to being examined. I assured him before I

left them together that Bankole was a doctor and my husband as well. He didn't say anything. I asked him what he wanted to eat. He shrugged and whispered, "Nothing. I'm okay."

"He's far from okay," Bankole told me later. But because Marcus wasn't in serious physical pain, we could keep him with us. We gave him a space behind screens—room dividers—in our kitchen. It was warm there, and we had set up a bed, a dresser, a pitcher and basin, and a lamp. Like every other household in the community, we sometimes had to take people in—strangers who were visiting, new people joining us, or neighbors within the community who weren't getting along with others in their own households.

I worried that Marcus, in his present state of mind, might get up in the night and run away. How long must he have dreamed of running away from Cougar and his friends? Now, waking up in a strange place, and not quite remembering how he had gotten there.…Just to be sure even after he had taken his sleeping pill, I went out and told our night watch—Beth Faircloth and Lucio Figueroa—to be careful. I told them Marcus might awake confused, and try to run away, and that they should be careful about shooting at a lone figure trying to get *away* from Acorn. Under normal circumstances such a figure would be thought a thief, and might be shot. We'd had great trouble with thieves during our first year, and we learned that if we were to survive, we couldn't afford to have much sympathy for them.

But Marcus must not be shot.

"You told me Zahra Balter saw your stepmother and your brothers shot down back in Robledo," Bankole said to me as we lay in bed together. "Well, he's been beaten, shot,

and burned. I can't imagine how he survived. Someone must have taken care of him, and it wouldn't have been your friend Cougar."

"No, it wouldn't have been Cougar," I agreed. "I want to know what happened. I hope he'll tell us. How was he with you when I left you two alone together?"

"Silent. Responsive and unembarrassed, but not speaking one unnecessary word."

"You're sure you can cure his infections?"

"They shouldn't be a problem. Let alone, any one of them would have killed him sooner or later. But with treatment, he should be all right—physically, anyway."

"He was 14 when I saw him last. He liked playing soccer and reading about the past and about foreign places. He was always taking things apart and sometimes getting them back together again, and he had a huge crush on Robin Balter, Harry's youngest sister. I don't know anything about him now. I don't know who he is."

"You'll have plenty of time to find out. I've told him he's going to be an uncle, by the way."

"Reaction?"

"None at all. At the moment, I don't think that even he knows who he is. He seems willing enough to be looked after; but I get the feeling he doesn't much care what happens to him. I think…I hope that that will change. You may be his best medicine."

"He was my favorite brother—and always the best-looking person in the family. He's still one of the best-looking people I've ever seen."

"Yes," Bankole said. "In spite of his scars, he's a good-looking boy. I wonder whether his looks have saved him or destroyed him. Or both."

It seems that things can never go well for long.

Dan Noyer has run away. He slipped past the watch and out of Acorn at least in part because of the instructions I gave to the night watch. Beth Faircloth says she saw someone—a man or boy, she thought.

"I thought the figure was too tall to be Marcus," she said when she phoned me. "But I wasn't sure—so I didn't shoot." The running figure had been dressed in dark clothing with something dark over the head and face.

Not until I had verified that Marcus was still there did I think of Dan.

To tell the truth, I had forgotten about Dan. My mind had been filled with Marcus—getting him back, keeping him, wondering what had happened to him. I had paid no attention to Dan. Yet Dan had suffered a terrible disappointment. He was in real pain. I knew that, and I left him to the Balters, who, after all, have two energetic little kids of their own to deal with.

I got Zahra out of bed and asked her to check on Dan. He had been staying with them for four months now. Of course, he was gone. His note said, "I know you'll think I'm wrong, but I have to find them. I can't let them be with someone like that Cougar. They're my sisters!" And after his signature, a postscript: "Take care of Kassi and Mercy until I come back. I'll work for you and pay you. I'll bring Paula and Nina back and they'll work too."

He's only 15. He saw Cougar and his crew. He saw my brother. He saw Georgetown. And seeing all that, he learned nothing!

No, that's not true. He's learned—or finally realized—all the wrong things. I had assumed he knew what his sisters' fate might be if they were alive—that they might be prostitutes, might wind up in some rich man's harem or

working as slave farm or factory laborers. Or, I suppose, they might wind up with some pervert who likes cutting out female tongues. They might even wind up as the property of someone who cares for them and looks after them even as he makes sexual use of them. That would be the best possibility. The worst, perhaps, is that they might survive for a while as "specialists"—prostitutes used to serve crazies and sadists. These don't live long, and that's a mercy. Theirs is a fate that could also befall a big, baby-faced, well-built boy like Dan. I wonder how much of this Dan understands. He is a good, brave, stupid boy, and I suspect he'll pay for it.

He might come back, of course. He might come to his senses and come home to help take care of Kassia and Mercy. Or we might find him through our outside contacts. I'll have to make sure that the word is out on him as well as on Nina and Paula. Problem is, finding him won't help if he's still intent on hunting for his sisters. We can't chain him here. Or rather, we won't. If he insists on dying, he will die, damn him. Damn!

SEVEN

From EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING

The child in each of us
Knows paradise.
Paradise is home.
Home as it was
Or home as it should have been.

Paradise is one's own place,
One's own people,
One's own world,
Knowing and known,
Perhaps even
Loving and loved.

Yet every child
Is cast from paradise—
Into growth and destruction,
Into solitude and new community,
Into vast, ongoing
Change.

FROM *Warrior* BY MARCOS DURAN

WHEN I WAS A kid, I never let anyone know how much the future scared me. In fact, I couldn't see any future. I was born into a world that was no bigger than the walled

neighborhood enclave where my family lived. My father had lived there as a boy and inherited the house from his father.

My world was a cage. When one of my brothers dared to leave the cage, to run away from home, someone outside caught him and cut and burned all the flesh from his living body. Sometimes I catch myself wondering how long it took him to die.

I admit, my brother was no angel. He was mean and not very bright. He loved our mother, and he was her favorite, but I don't think he ever gave a damn about anyone else. Still, even though he was as tall as our father, he was only 14 when he was killed. To me, that makes the men who killed him worse than he ever was. How could they be human and do a thing like that to somebody? I used to imagine them—the killers—waiting for me whenever neighborhood adults with guns risked taking us out of the cage for a little while. The world outside was like my brother at his worst multiplied by about a thousand: stupid, mean, so out of control that it might do anything. It was like a dog with rabies, tearing itself to pieces, and wanting to do the same to me.

And then it did just that.

Oh, yes. It did.

I could return the compliment. I could have reached for the power to do that. But I would rather fix the problem. What happened to me shouldn't happen to anyone, yet such things have happened to thousands of people, perhaps millions. I've read history. Things weren't always this way. They don't have to go on being this way. What we have broken we can mend.

My Uncle Marc was the handsomest man I've ever seen.

I think I fell more than half in love with him before I even met him.

There were also times when I was afraid for him. I don't know what to make of our family. My grandfather was, from what I've heard, a good and dedicated Baptist minister. He looked after his family and his community and insisted that both be armed and able to defend themselves in an armed and dangerous world, but beyond that, he had no ambitions. It never seemed to occur to him that he could or should fix the world. Yet he was the father of two would-be world-fixers. How did that happen?

Well, my mother was a sharer, a little adult at 15, and a survivor of the destruction of her whole neighborhood at 18. Perhaps that was why she, like Uncle Marc, needed to take charge, to bring her own brand of order to the chaos that she saw swallow so many of the people she loved. She saw chaos as natural and inevitable and as clay to be shaped and directed. As she says in one of her verses:

Chaos
Is God's most dangerous face—
Amorphous, roiling, hungry.
Shape Chaos—
Shape God.
Act.

Alter the speed
Or the direction of Change.
Vary the scope of Change.
Recombine the seeds of Change.

Transmute the impact of Change.
Seize Change,
Use it.
Adapt and grow.

And so she tried to adapt and to grow. Perhaps she feared being like her own mother, who looked for help in a "smart" drug and wound up damaging her child and killing herself.

Chaos. Whatever my mother's reasoning, she decided that she knew what was wrong with her world, and she knew what would fix it: Earthseed. Earthseed with all its definitions, admonitions, requirements, *purpose*. Earthseed with its Destiny.

My Uncle Marc, on the other hand, hated the chaos. It wasn't one of the faces of his god. It was unnatural. It was demonic. He hated what it had done to him, and he needed to prove that he was not what it had forced him to become. No Christian minister could ever hate sin as much as Marc hated chaos. His gods were order, stability, safety, control. He was a man with a wound that would not heal until he could be certain that what had happened to him could not happen again to anyone, ever.

My father called my mother a zealot. I think that name applies even more to Uncle Marc. And yet, I think Uncle Marc was more of a realist. Uncle Marc wanted to make the Earth a better place. Uncle Marc knew that the stars could take care of themselves.

FROM *The Journals of Lauren Oya Olamina*
SATURDAY, DECEMBER 18, 2032

Dan hasn't come back. I had no reason to expect him to give up and come home so quickly, but I did hope. Jorge, Diamond Scott, and Gray Mora are going to trade at the Coy street market today. I've told them to leave word with the few people we know in Coy, and on the way back, to tell the Sullivan family. Their quickest way home takes them past the Sullivan place.

Marcus slept through the night, causing no trouble to himself or to us. Bankole happened to be in the kitchen when he awoke, and that was good. Bankole took him out to one of our composting toilets. I didn't see him until later when he had washed and dressed. Then he came hesitant and tentative, to my kitchen table.

"Hungry?" I asked. "Sit down."

He stared at me for several seconds, then said, "When I woke up, I thought all this was just a dream."

I put a piece of fruit-laden acorn bread in front of him. We had both been raised on the stuff because our old neighborhood happened to have several very fruitful California live oak trees within the walls. My father didn't believe in waste, so he found out how to use acorns as food. Native Americans did it. We could do it. He and my mother worked at learning to use not only acorns but cactuses, palm fruit, and other plants that might otherwise be seen as useless. For Marcus and me, all this was food from home.

Marcus took the acorn bread, lit into it, and chewed slowly. First he looked delighted, then tears began to stream down his face. I gave him a napkin and a glass of what had once been a favorite morning drink of his—a mug of hot, sweet apple juice with a lemon squeezed into it. The apples we pressed in southern California were of a different variety, but I don't think he noticed. He ate, wiped his eyes,

looked around. He stared at Bankole as Bankole came in, then focused on the rest of his breakfast, all but huddling over it the way a hawk does when its claiming and protecting its kill. There was no more talk for a while.

When we had all had enough to eat, Bankole looked at Marcus and said, “I’ve been married to your sister for five years. During all that time, we believed that you and the rest of her family were dead.”

“I thought she was dead, too,” Marcus said.

“Zahra Balter—she was Zahra Moss when you knew her—she said she saw all of you killed,” I told him.

He frowned. “Moss? Balter?”

“We didn’t know Zahra very well back home. She was married to Richard Moss. He was killed and she married Harry Balter.”

“God,” he said. “I never thought I’d hear those names again. I do remember Zahra—tiny, beautiful, and tough.”

“She’s still all three. She and Harry are here. They’ve got two kids.”

“I want to see them!”

“Okay.”

“Who else is here?”

“A lot of people who’ve been through hard times. No one else from home, though. This community is called Acorn.”

“There was a little girl…Robin. Robin Balter?”

“Harry’s little sister. She didn’t make it.”

“You thought I didn’t.”

“I…saw Robin’s body, Marc. She didn’t make it.”

He sighed and stared at his hands resting in his lap. “I did die back in ’27. I died. There’s nothing left.”

“There’s family,” I said. “There’s me, Bankole, the niece or nephew who’ll be born next year. You’re free now. You

can stay here and make a life for yourself in Acorn. I hope you will. But you're free to do what you want. No one here wears a collar."

"Have you ever worn one?" he asked.

"No. Some of us have been slaves, but I never was. And I believe you're the first of us who's worn a collar. I hope you'll talk or write about what happened to you since the old neighborhood was destroyed."

He seemed to think about that for a while. "No," he said. "No."

Too soon. "Okay," I said, "but…do you think any of the others could have survived? Cory or Ben or Greg? Is it possible…?"

"No," he repeated. "No, they're dead. I got out. They didn't."

Sometime later, as we got up from the table, two men arrived by truck from the little coastal town of Halstead. Like Acorn,
Halstead is well off the main highway. In fact, Halstead must be the most remote, isolated town in our area with the Pacific Ocean on three sides of it and low mountains behind it.

In spite of all that, Halstead has a major problem. Halstead used to have a beach and above the beach was a palisade where the town began. Along the palisade, some of the biggest, nicest houses sat, overlooking the ocean. On one side of the peninsula were the old houses, large, well-built wood frame structures. On the other side were newer houses built on land that was once a seaside golf course. All of these are…were lined up along the palisade. I don't know why people would build their homes on the edge of a cliff like that, but they did. Now, whenever we have heavy rains, when there's an earthquake, or when the level of the sea

rises enough to saturate more land, great blocks of the palisades drop into the sea, and the houses sitting on them break apart and fall. Sometimes half a house falls into the sea. Sometimes it's several houses. Last night it was three of them. The people of Halstead were still fishing victims out of the sea. Worse, the community doctor had been delivering a baby in one of the lost houses. That's why the community was turning to Bankole for help. Bankole had been on good terms with their doctor. The people of Halstead trusted Bankole because their doctor had trusted him.

"What are you people thinking?" Bankole demanded of the weary, desperate Halstead men as he and I snatched up things he would need. He was adding to his medical bag. I was packing an overnight case for him. Marcus had looked from one of us to the other, then moved off to one side, out of the way.

"Why do you still have people living on the cliffs?" Bankole demanded. He sounded angry. Unnecessary pain and death still made him angry. "How many times does this kind of thing have to happen before you get the idea?" he asked. He shut his bag and grabbed the overnight case that I handed him. "Move the damned houses inland, for heaven's sake. Make it a long-term community effort."

"We're doing what we can," a big red-haired man said, moving toward the door. He pushed his hair out of his face with a dirty, abraded hand. "We've moved some. Others refuse to have their houses moved. They think they'll be okay. We can't force them."

Bankole shook his head, then kissed me. "This could take two or three days," he said. "Don't worry, and don't do anything foolish. Behave yourself!" And he went.

I sighed, and began to clear away the breakfast things.

“So he really is a doctor,” Marcus said.

I paused and looked at him. “Yes, and he and I really are married,” I said. “And I’m really pregnant. Did you think we were telling you lies?”

“…no. I don’t know.” He paused. “You can’t change everything in your life all at once. You just can’t.”

“You can,” I said. “We both have. It hurts. It’s terrible. But you can do it.”

He reached for the plate I was about to take, and scavenged a few crumbs of Acorn bread from it. “It tastes like Mama’s,” he said, and he looked up at me. “I didn’t believe it was you at first. Yesterday in that godforsaken shantytown, I saw you, and I thought I had finally lost my mind. I remember, I thought, ‘Good. Now I’m crazy. Now nothing matters. Maybe I’ll see Mama, too. Maybe I’m dead.’ But I could still feel the weight of the collar around my neck, so I knew I wasn’t dead. Just crazy.”

“Then you knew me,” I said. “And you looked away before Cougar could see that you knew me. I saw you.”

He swallowed. Nodded. A long time later, he shut his eyes and leaned his face into his hand. “If you still want me to,” he said, “I’ll tell you what happened.”

I managed not to sigh with relief. “Thank you.”

“I mean, you’ve got to tell me things, too. Like how you wound up here. And how you wound up married to a man older than Dad.”

“He’s a year younger than Dad. And when we had both lost almost everything else and everyone else, we found each other. Laugh if you want to, but we were damned lucky.”

“I’m not laughing. I found good people too, at first. Or rather, they found me.”

I sat down opposite him, and waited. For a time, he

stared at the wall, at nothing, at the past.

"Everything was burning on that last night," he said. His voice was low and even. "There was so much shooting. …Hoards of bald, painted people, mostly kids, had rammed their dammed truck through our gate. They were everywhere. And they had their fun with Ben and Greg and Mama and me. In all the confusion, Lauren, we didn't even know you were gone until we had almost reached the gate. Then a blue-painted guy grabbed Ben—just snatched him and tried to run off with him. I was too small to do any good fighting him one-on-one, but I was fast. I ran after him and tackled him. I might not have been able to bring him down by myself, but Mama jumped on him too. We dragged him down, and when he fell, he hit his head on the concrete and he dropped Ben. Mama grabbed Ben and I grabbed Greg. Greg had hurt his foot—stepped on a rock and twisted it—while we were running.

"This time, we made it out through the wrecked gate. I didn't know where we were going. I was just following Mama, and we were both looking around for you." He paused. "What happened to you?"

"I saw someone get shot," I said, remembering, shuddering with the memory. "I shared the pain of the gunshot, got caught up in the death. Then when I could get up, I found a gun. I took it from the hand of someone who was dead. That was good because a moment later, one of the paints grabbed me, and I had to shoot him. I shared his death, and in the confusion of that, I lost track of you guys and of time. When I could, I ran out of the gate and spent the rest of the night a few blocks north of our neighborhood huddling in someone's half-burned garage. The next day I came back looking for you. That's when I found Harry and Zahra. We were all pretty beaten up. Zahra told me you

guys were dead."

Marcus shook his head. "I wish we had been with you. Then we could have been just 'beaten up.' Everything went wrong for us. Just as we went through the gate another group of paints arrived."

He paused. "You know, I met some paints later. Most of them killed themselves off, with their drugs, or with their drug-induced love of fire. But there are still a few around. Anyway…I was collared with some a few months ago. They said their whole deal was to help the poor by killing off the rich and letting the poor take their stuff. If you lived in a place where the houses weren't falling down, and especially if you had a wall around your neighborhood or your house, that meant you were rich. The crazy thing was, a lot of the paint kids really were rich. One of the girls I met, her family had more money than our whole neighborhood put together. She had pretty much given up everything for the paints, but in the end her friends betrayed her. One day while she was spaced out on something, they sold her to be collared because she was still young and cute, and they needed money for drugs. But she still thought she'd done some good. We couldn't convince her. We figured the drugs had wiped out her mind."

"She had to believe in something," I said. "And after all, what did she have left?"

"I guess. Anyway, we were caught between these two groups of goddamn saviors of the poor." He sighed. "They were shooting—most of them firing into the air at first—and waving torches.…More fire.…We couldn't do anything but run back in through the gate.

"Everything was crazy. Ben and Greg were crying. People were running everywhere. All the houses were burning. Then someone shot me. I was knocked down,

stunned. At first I didn't understand what had hit me. Then I felt this unbelievable pain. I must have dropped Greg. I tried to look around for him. That's when I understood that I was down on the sidewalk. I felt slammed down, stomped, plus stabbed through the right shoulder and arm by a hot poker. I never knew who shot me or why. We didn't have guns. I guess they just shot us for fun.

"Then I saw Mama get shot. The truth is, it all happened so fast—first me, then her, bang, bang. I know that. But at the time.…I remember seeing it all, taking it all in as though I had plenty of time. And yet I was desperate to get out of there, and scared to death. Jesus God, there's no way I can make you know how bad it was.

"I saw Mama stagger and collapse. She made a horrible noise, and I saw blood pouring from her neck. I knew then that…she…that she was dying. I knew it.

"I tried to get up, tried to make myself go to her. But while I was struggling to stand, a green-painted woman ran up and shot her through the head.

"I slipped in my own blood and fell back. From the ground, I saw a red guy shoot Ben twice through the head, then step over him and shoot Greg. I saw him. I was yelling. The red guy had an automatic rifle—an old AK-47. He shot Ben while Ben was trying to get up. Ben's head…just… broke apart.

"But Greg was down on the sidewalk—moving, but down. When the guy shot him, the bullets must have ricocheted off the concrete. They hit another paint in the legs. He screamed and fell down. That made all the paints nearby mad. It was like they thought we had shot their man —like his being wounded was our fault. They grabbed all four of us and dragged us over to the Balter house. It was burning, and they threw us into the fire.

“They did that. They threw us into the fire. I was the only one who was conscious. I was maybe the only one alive, but I couldn’t stop them. Somehow, though, once they threw me in, I got up and ran out. I just ran, panicked out of my mind, blind with smoke and pain, not human anymore. I should have died.

“Later, I wished I had died. Later, all I wanted to do was die.”

Marcus stopped and sat silent for several seconds.

“Someone must have helped you,” I said when I thought the silence had gone on long enough. “You were only 14.”

“I was only 14,” he agreed. After another silence, he went on.

“I think I must have fallen down in the Balter yard. I was on fire. I didn’t think about rolling on the ground to put the fire out, but I must have done it. I was just scrambling around in panic and pain, and the fire did go out. Then all I could do was lie there. I must have passed out at some point. When I woke up—I have a clear memory of this—I was on a big wooden wagon on top of a lot of scorched clothes and some pots and pans and junk. I could see the sidewalk passing under me—broken concrete, weeds growing in the holes and cracks, and I could see the backs of a man and woman walking ahead, leaning forward, pulling the wagon with rope harnesses. Then I passed out again.

“A pair of scavengers, picking over the bones of our neighborhood had found me groaning—although I don’t remember groaning or being found—and they had loaded me onto their salvage wagon. They were a middle-aged couple named Duran, believe it or not. Maybe they were distant relatives or something. It’s a pretty common name,

though."

I nodded. Not unusual at all, but the only Duran I happened to know was my stepmother. Duran was her maiden name. Well, if these Durans had saved my brother's life five years ago when he couldn't have lived without their help, I was more than willing to be related to them.

"They had had an 11-year old daughter kidnapped from them the year before they found me," Marcus said. "They never found her, never found out what happened to her, but I can guess. You could sell a pretty little girl for a lot then. Just like now. I've heard people say things are getting better. Maybe so, but I haven't noticed. Anyway the Durans were handsome people. Their daughter could have been really pretty."

He sighed. "The kid's name was Caridad. They said I looked enough like her to be her brother. The woman said that. Inez was her name. She was the one who insisted on collecting what was left of me and taking it home to nurse back to health.

"I'm surprised I even looked human when she found me. My face wasn't too bad—blood and bruises from falling down a few times. But the rest of me was a hell of a mess.

"There was no way these people could afford a doctor—not even for themselves. So Inez herself worked on me. She worked so hard to save me—like a second mother. The man thought I would die. He thought it was stupid to waste time, effort, and valuable resources on me. But he loved her, so he let her have her way.

"These people were a lot poorer than we used to be, but they did what they could with what they had. For me that meant soap and water, aspirin and aloe vera. Why I didn't die of 20 infections I don't know. I goddamn sure wanted to die. I'll tell you, I'd rather blow my own brains out than go

through that again."

I shook my head. I had no medical training beyond first aid, and I doubt that I'd be much good administering that, but I'd lived with Bankole long enough to know how nasty burns could be. "No complications at all?" I demanded.

Marcus shook his head. "I don't know, really. Most of the time I was in so much pain I didn't know what was going on. How could I tell a complication from the general run of misery?"

I shook my head, and wondered what Bankole would say when I told him. Soap and water and aspirin and aloe vera. Well, a little humility would be good for him. To Marcus, I said, "What happened to the Durans?"

"Dead," he whispered. "At least I guess they're dead. So many died. I never found their bodies, though, and I tried. I did try."

Long silence.

"Marcus?" I reached over and put my hand on his.

He pulled away and put his hands to his face. I heard him sigh behind them. Then he began to talk again. "Four years after our neighborhood burned, the city of Robledo decided to clean itself up. The Durans and I were squatters. We shared a big, abandoned stucco house with five other families. That meant we were part of the trash that the new mayor, the city council, and the business community wanted to sweep out. It seemed to them that all the trouble of the past few years was our fault—poor people's fault, I mean. Homeless people's fault. Squatters' fault. So they sent an army of cops to drive out everyone who couldn't prove they had a right to be where they were. You had to have rent receipts, a deed, utility receipts, something. At first, there was a hell of a business in fake paper. I wrote some of it myself—not for sale, but for the Durans and their friends.

Most people couldn't read or write or at least not in English, so they needed help. I saw that some of them were paying hard currency for crap, so I started writing—rent receipts, mostly. In the end, it was all for nothing. Between them, the city and the county owned most of the rotting buildings in our area, and the cops knew we didn't belong there, no matter what papers we had. They drove us all out—poor squatters, drug dealers, junkies, crazies, gangs, whores, you name it."

"Where were you living?" I asked. "What part of town?"

"Valley Street," Marcus said. "Old factory buildings, parking structures, ancient houses and stores, all packed with people."

"And vacant lots full of weeds and trash where people dump inconvenient dead bodies," I continued for him.

"That's the area, yes. The Durans were poor. They worked all the time, but sometimes they didn't even get enough to eat—especially sharing with me. When I was well enough, I worked with them. We cleaned, repaired, and sold anything we could salvage. We took whatever jobs we could get—cleaning, assembling, constructing, repairing. They never lasted long. There were a lot of people like us and not so many jobs, so wages were terrible. Just food and water sometimes, or some old clothes or shoes or something. They'd even pay you in American money if they thought they could get away with palming it off on you. Hard currency if they gave a damn about treating you right. Most didn't. Also, hard currency if they were a little bit afraid of you or of your friends.

"In spite of all our efforts, there was no way we could afford to rent even a shabby little apartment or house. We lived on Valley Street because we couldn't do any better.

With all that, though, it probably wasn't as bad as you think. People looked after one another there, except for the worst junkies and thugs. Everyone knew who they were. I did reading and writing for people even before the fake-paper craze. They paid me what they could. And…I helped some of them hold church on Sundays. There was an old carport behind the house we lived in. It projected from a garage where three families lived, but as it happened, no one lived under the carport. We met for church there and I would preach and teach as best I could. They let me do it. They came to hear me even though I was a kid. I taught them songs and everything. They said I had a gift, a calling. The truth was, thanks to Dad, I knew more about the Bible than any of them, and more about real church."

He paused, looked at me. "I liked it, you know? I prayed with them, helped them any way I could. Their lives were so terrible. There wasn't much I could do, but I did what I could. It was important to them that I had recovered from burns and gunshots. A lot of them had seen me back when I looked like vomit. They thought if I could recover from that, God must have something in mind for me.

"The Durans were proud of me. They gave me their name. I was Marcos Duran. That's who I was during my four years with them. That's who I still am. I found a real home there.

"Then the cops came and drove us into the street. Behind them came demolition crews to push down the houses, blow up the buildings, and destroy everything we had been forced to leave behind. People were dragged or driven into the street without all kinds of things—spare clothing, money, pictures, personal papers….Some people who couldn't speak English were even driven out without relatives who had managed to hide or who were too sick or

disabled to run. The cops dragged some of these out and put them in trucks. They didn't find them all. I sent them to get seven that I knew of, and they brought them out.

"But everything was chaos. People kept trying to run back to get their things, and the cops kept stopping them—or trying to. Some of the cops were in armored personnel carriers. The ones on foot had full body armor, masks, shields, automatic rifles, gas, whips, clubs, you name it, but still, some people tried to stop them, or at least to hurt them. The people threw rocks, bottles, even precious cans of food.

"Then someone fired three shots, and one of the cops went down. I don't know whether he was wounded or he tripped, but there were the shots, and he fell. And that was that. Everything went to hell.

"The cops started shooting. People ran, screamed, shot back if they had guns. I got separated from the Durans. I started looking for them even before the shooting stopped. No one shot me this time, but I didn't find the Durans. I never found them. I tried for days. I looked at as many dead bodies as I could before they were collected. I did everything I could think of, but they were gone. After a while, I knew they must be dead, and I was alone again."

Marcus sat still, staring into space. "I loved them," he said, his voice soft and filled with pain. "And I loved being Marcos Duran—the little preacher. People trusted me, respected me….It was a good life. Most of them were good people—just poor. They deserved so much better than they got." He shook his head.

"I didn't know what to do," he continued after a moment. "I hung around the Valley Street area for two more weeks, saw all the buildings go down and the rubble carried away. I stole food where I could, avoided the cops, and kept

looking for the Durans. I'd said they were dead, and on some level, I believed they were, but I couldn't stop looking.

"But there was nothing. No one." He hesitated. "No, that's not quite right. Some people from my poor, half-assed church came back to see what was left. I met three families of them. They all asked me to stay with them. They had relatives squatting in other hovels, overcrowded like you wouldn't believe, but they figured they could take in one more. I had nothing, but they wanted me. I should have gone with them. I probably would have set up another church outside of town, gotten married, and raised a family —Dad all over again. I would have been okay. Poor, but okay. Poor doesn't matter as much if you can make a place for yourself and be respected. I know that now, but I didn't then.

"I was 18. I figured it was time for me to be a man, get out on my own. I figured there was nothing for me in southern California. It was a place where you could only be poor unless you were born rich or you were a really successful crook. I thought that meant I had to go north. There was always a river of people walking north on the freeway. I thought they must know something. I talked to people about Alaska, Canada, Washington, Oregon…I never intended to stay in California."

"Neither did I," I said.

"You walked up?"

"I did. So did Bankole, Harry, Zahra….A lot of us did."

"Nobody bothered you?"

"A lot of people bothered us. Harry, Zahra, and I survived because we stuck together and one of us always kept watch. We started out with my one gun. We gathered more people and more guns along the way. I lost count of the number of times we were nearly killed. One of us was

killed. There may be an easy way to get here, but we didn't find it."

"Neither did I. But why did you come here? I mean, why didn't you keep going to Oregon or someplace?"

"Bankole owns this land," I said. "By the time we got near here, well, he and I wanted to stay together, but I also wanted…I wanted to keep the rest of the group together. I was building a community—a group of families and single people who were still human."

"You walk the roads for a while, and you wonder if anyone is still human."

"Yeah."

"The people you brought here—they built this place?"

I nodded. "There was nothing here when we got here but the ashes of a house, the bones of Bankole's relatives, some untended crops and trees, and a well. There were only 13 of us then. There are 66 of us now—67 with you."

"You just let people come here and stay? What if they rob you, cheat you, kill you? What if they're crazy?"

"Give me some credit, Marc."

His face changed in an odd way. "You. You personally." He paused. "I thought at first this was Bankole's place, that he'd taken you in."

"I told you, this is his land."

"But it's your place."

"It's our place. I've shaped it, but it doesn't belong to me. I've invited people to come here and build lives for themselves, to join us." I hesitated, wondering how much he still believed in religion as our father had taught it to us. When he was little, he always seemed to take Dad's religion as real, as obvious, as a given. But what did he believe now that he had suffered the destruction of two homes and the loss of two families, then endured prostitution and slavery?

He still had not talked about that last part of his story. Had his religion given him hope, or had it withered and fallen away when his God did not rescue him? Back in Robledo, he had run a simple outdoor church, had been serious about it. But where was he now? I made myself continue. “And I’ve given them a belief system to help them deal with the world as it is and the world as it can be—as people like them can make it.”

“You mean you’re their preacher?” he asked.

I nodded. “We don’t call it that, but yes.”

He looked surprised, then gave a short bark of laughter. “Religion is in our genes,” he said. “It must be. Either that or Dad did a hell of a job on us.”

“We call our system Earthseed,” I said. “My actual title is ‘Shaper.’ ”

He stared at me for several seconds, saying nothing. He still looked surprised, and now confused. “Earthseed?” he said at last. “My god, I’ve heard of you guys. You’re that cult!”

“So we’ve been called.”

“There was a politician. He was running for the state senate, I think. He won. He was a Jarret supporter. He was making a speech in Arcata when I was up there, and he was listing devil-worshiping cults. He named Earthseed as one of them. I’d never heard of it, but I remember because he was going on about how the name actually referred to the devil, the seed deep in the earth and growing like a poisonous fungus to spread its evil to more and more people.”

“Oh, Marc….”

“I didn’t make it up. He really said that.”

I drew a deep breath. “We don’t worship the devil. In fact, we don’t worship anyone. And we are Earthseed. Human beings are Earthseed. We have no devils. But we’re

so small that I'm surprised your politician had ever heard of us. And I wish he hadn't. Such lies!"

He shrugged. "It was just politics. You know those guys will say anything. But why would you stop being a Christian? Why would you make up a new religion?"

"I didn't make it up. It was something I had been thinking about since I was 12. It was—is—a collection of truths. It isn't the whole truth. It isn't the only truth. It's just one collection of thoughts that are true. I could never say anything about it at home. I never wanted to hurt Dad. But his way didn't work for me. I wanted it to. I would have been a lot more comfortable if it had. But it didn't. Earthseed does."

"But you made Earthseed up. Or if you didn't make it up, you read it or heard about it somewhere."

I had heard this many times before. It seemed to be one of the things that every new potential member said. I even kept a simple teaching tool near at hand to deal with it. I got up and went to a bookshelf where a beautiful piece of rose quartz that Bankole had given me acted as a bookend for the few books I kept here in the house and not in the library section of the school.

"Look at this," I said, "and tell me something." I put the rock in his hands. "If I were to analyze this stone and find out exactly what it's made of, would that mean I made it up?"

"That's not a good comparison, Lauren. The rock exists. Earthseed didn't exist until you made it up."

"All the truths of Earthseed existed somewhere before I found them and put them together. They were in the patterns of history, in science, philosophy, religion, or literature. I didn't make any of them up."

"You just put them together."

"Yes."

"Then you did make Earthseed up the same way you would have made a novel up if you wrote one. You wouldn't have to find anything brand-new for your characters to do or be in a novel. I don't think you could if you wanted to."

"Except that by definition, a novel is fiction. Don't call Earthseed fiction. You don't know anything about it except the lies told by an opportunistic politician." I took down a copy of *The First Book of the Living* and handed it to him. "Come and talk to me after you've read this."

"You wrote this?"

"Yes."

"And you believe in it?"

"I believe it. I wouldn't teach people that things were true if I didn't believe them."

"Back in Robledo, I remember you were always writing. Keith used to sneak into your room and read your diary. Or at least he said he did."

I thought about that for a moment. "I don't think he ever read my journal," I said. "I mean, I know I was always chasing him out of my room. I chased you out, too, plenty of times. But I think if Keith had read my journal, he wouldn't have been able to resist using it against me. Besides, Keith never read anything unless he had to."

"Yeah." He paused, gazing down at the table. "It's weird to think I'm older now than he ever got to be. He still seems older and bigger when I think about him. He was such a goddamn asshole." He shook his head. "I think I really hated him, you know, the way he was always making trouble for everybody, beating the rest of us up—except you. He was afraid of you because you were so much bigger. And Mama…she loved him more than she loved all of us put together."

“It wasn’t that bad, Marc.”

He looked up at me, solemn-eyed. “It was, though. She wasn’t your mother, so maybe you didn’t feel it the way I did, but it was that bad and then some.”

“I felt it. Toward the end when she and I needed each other most, I’m not sure she loved me at all. But she was so scared and so desperate….Forgive her, Marc. She was in a hellish place with four children to look out for. If it made her less rational than she should have been…well, forgive her.”

There was a long silence. He stared at the book, open at the first page:

All that you touch
You Change.

All that you Change
Changes you.

The only lasting truth
Is Change.

God
Is Change.

I couldn’t tell whether he had read the words at first. He seemed to stare the way blind people do, unseeing, blank. Then he whispered, “Oh, god,” and it sounded like a prayer. He shut the book and closed his eyes. “I’m not sure I want to read your book, Lauren,” he said. He opened his eyes and looked at me. “You haven’t asked how I wound up with Cougar.”

"I want to know," I admitted.

"Simple. My first night walking the freeway, three guys jumped me—big guys. I didn't have much money and that pissed them off—you know, like I was supposed to be rich so that robbing me would be worth their while. If I wasn't rich, then I had cheated them, and they had a right to get me for it. Shit."

He was staring at the table again, and I imagined him as he must have been then, facing three big men. He had always been slight and much too attractive for his own good—a beautiful boy, and now, such a handsome young man. I had seen the girls and women of the community staring at him as we brought him from the truck to the house last night. If he stayed, they would be all over him.

He would be stronger now. He had a look of wiry strength about him. But even now, he wouldn't be strong enough to hold off three attackers. And he'd had no friends with him, watching his back on the freeway that night.

After a while, he spoke again, still staring at the table. "They didn't just beat the hell out of me and rape me and let me go," he said. "They kept me so they could do it over and over again. And when they got tired of me, they sold me to a pimp. Not Cougar. He came later. The first one called himself Zorro. All these guys seem to have stupid names. Anyway, Zorro was the first to put a collar around my neck. After that people didn't have to bother beating me up—unless they felt like it. Some people get turned on by beating the shit out of a guy who can't fight back. And….You know the worst thing about a collar, Lauren? They can torture you with it every day. Every goddamn day. And you never have any marks to mess you up and drive down your price, and you never die of it! Or most people don't die of it. Some are lucky. They have heart attacks or

strokes and they die. But the rest of us live no matter what. And if we try to find some other way to die, to kill ourselves, they can stop us. The guy with the control unit can play you the way Mama used to play her piano. You get so you'll do anything—anything!—just to get him to let you alone for a few minutes. You walk past a corpse on the road —some poor old guy who couldn't walk any farther or a woman someone had raped and killed. You walk past the corpse, and you wish like hell it was you."

He sighed and shook his head. "That's it, really. I had one more owner between Zorro and Cougar, but he was walking shit too. You can't own people and torture them for fun and profit without being shit. A pimp would sell his mother and his daughter if the price were right. And if I ever get the chance, I swear to god, Lauren, I'll stake all three of them out and I'll burn them—like Jarret's people do with their so-called witches." After a moment, he added, "I saw that done once—a burning. Sargent—my second owner —did it to a woman who tried to kill him in his sleep. She was a beautiful woman. Sargent and his friends wiped out her family to get her, but then he slept with her before she had learned the rules.

"These are the rules: Once you've got a collar on, you can't run. Get a certain distance from the control unit and the collar chokes you. I mean it gives you so much pain that you can't keep going. You pass out if you try. We called that getting choked. Touch the control unit and the collar chokes you. It won't work for you anyway. It's got a fingerprint lock. And if the fingers trying to use it are wrong or are dead, it chokes you and stays on choke until someone with the right living fingers turns it off. Or until you die. When someone threatens a pimp, sometimes he'll make his oldest, least popular whores fight for him, shield him. The truth is,

while they're wearing the collars, all his whores will fight for him, no matter how much they hate him. They'll fight hard. They might not even care whether or not they get killed.

"And, of course, if you try to cut, burn, or otherwise damage the collar, it chokes you.

"The girl, she tried to take revenge for her family. She never knew why the other whore Sargent had with him that night stopped her. The other whore begged her not to do it. He tried to explain, but she wouldn't listen. Then Sargent woke up. The next day, he gathered all his whores together, and he staked the girl out naked and made us all gather wood and stack it around her and on top of her with just her head showing. Then he made us watch while he…while he burned her."

It occurred to me that Marcus was the "other whore" who saved Sargent's life. Maybe he was. I would not ask. Perhaps on some level, the "other whore" was him even if it wasn't, really. A collar, my brother was saying, makes you turn traitor against your kind, against your freedom, against yourself. This was what had been done to him. And what had it made of him? Who and what was he now? No one could go through what he has gone through and not change somehow. No wonder the first of the Earthseed verses had reached him.

I took him to see Zahra and Harry, and they both hugged him, amazed. Zahra, in particular, who had seen him shot and thrown into the fire, kept staring at him and touching him. He stared back at them the way I've seen half-starved people stare at food that they couldn't beg, buy, or steal.

“Call me Marcos,” my brother said to me as I showed him our school-library-Gathering Hall. He was about to attend his first
Gathering, but I had brought him to the school early so that he could see more of what we had built. He seemed impressed with the building and with our collection of salvaged, purchased, and bartered books, but I had gotten the impression that there was something else on his mind. Now here it was.

“I’ve been Marcos Duran for more than five years now,” he said. “I don’t really know how to be Marcus Olamina anymore.”

I didn’t know what to make of that. After a while, I said, “Do you…? Is it that you don’t want people to think of me as your sister?”

He looked horrified. “No, Lauren. It’s not like that.” He paused, thought for a moment. “It’s more like Marcus Olamina was my childhood name. I’m not that kid anymore. I’ll never be him again.”

I nodded. “Okay.” And then, “Thanks to Bankole, just about everyone here calls me Olamina, so maybe it’s just as well. Less confusing.”

“Your husband calls you by your maiden name?”

“He doesn’t like my first name, so he ignores it. That’s fair. I didn’t like his first name either. It’s Taylor, by the way, and I ignore it.”

My brother shrugged. “Your business, I guess. Just call me Marcos.”

I shrugged too. “All right,” I said.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 22, 2032

Bankole is home. He says the doctor in Halstead is dead, and the people there—the mayor and town council—have asked him to move there and become their doctor full time.

He wants to. For my sake and the baby's as well as his own, he wants to more than anything. It's a chance that may not come his way again, he says. He's an old man, he says. He's got to think of the future, and I've got to think of the baby, he says. I've got to be realistic, for god's sake, and stop dreaming, he says.

I'm not conveying the full flavor of this. It's the same old stuff. He's said most of it before, and I'm damned tired of it. But it's worse now. It's scarier. Bankole means it more than he ever has before because he has an offer now—a real offer. And he means it because there is this small new life between us, growing inside me. I've had no morning sickness, none of the swellings and discomforts and moodiness that Zahra has when she's pregnant. And yet, I don't doubt for a moment that my daughter is within me. Bankole's checked, and he says she's a girl. In gentler moments, we bicker about her name—Beryl like his mother or, from my point of view, almost anything that isn't Beryl. Such an old-fashioned name.

But sometimes all of the ease and the joy and the love that I feel because of our child growing and developing within me seems lost on Bankole. All he seems to see is what he calls my immaturity, my irrational, unrealistic faith in Earthseed, my selfishness, my shortsightedness.

2033

From EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING

Partnership is giving, taking, learning, teaching, offering the greatest possible benefit while doing the least possible harm. Partnership is mutualistic symbiosis. Partnership is life.

Any entity, any process that cannot or should not be resisted or avoided must somehow be partnered. Partner one another. Partner diverse communities. Partner life. Partner any world that is your home. Partner God. Only in partnership can we thrive, grow, Change. Only in partnership can we live.

EIGHT

From EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING

Purpose
Unifies us:
It focuses our dreams,
Guides our plans,
Strengthens our efforts.
Purpose
Defines us,
Shapes us,
And offers us
Greatness.

I'M NOT ENTIRELY SURE why I've spent so much time looking at my mother's life before I was born. Perhaps it's because this seems the most human, normal time of her life. I wanted to know who she was when she was a young wife and soon-to-be mother, when she was a friend, a sister, and, incidentally, the local minister.

Should she have left Acorn and gone to live in Halstead as my father asked? Of course she should have! And if she had, would she, my father, and I have managed to have normal, comfortable lives through Jarret's upheavals? I believe we would have. My father called her immature, unrealistic, selfish, and shortsighted. Shortsighted, of all things! If there are sins in Earthseed, shortsightedness, lack of forethought, is the worst of them. And yet shortsighted is exactly what she was. She sacrificed us for an idea. And if she

didn't know what she was doing, she should have known—she who paid so much attention to the news, to the times and the trends. As an adolescent, she saw her father's error when he could not see it—his dependence on walls and guns, religious faith, and a hope that the good old days would return. Yet what more than that did she have? If her good days were to be in the future on some extra-solar world, that only made them more pathetically unreal.

FROM *The Journals of Lauren Oya Olamina*
SUNDAY, JANUARY 16, 2033

People keep pet dogs in Halstead, as they do in most local cities and towns.

I know that, but I grew up down south, where poor people and dogs didn't run together. They ate one another. Dogs ran in packs, and they were one of the things we were glad our walls kept out. Some of the very rich used vicious dogs to guard their property. They were the only ones who could afford to buy meat, then feed it to a dog. The rest of us, if we got meat, were glad to eat it ourselves.

Even now, it startles me every time I see people and dogs together and peaceful. But the people of local towns and family farms, while not rich, have food enough to share with dogs—even dogs who do no work and only lie around all day with their mouths open and their long, sharp teeth showing. Children play with them. More than once in the past few days, I've had to quell my impulse to snatch a child away from those teeth and beat off the dog.

It's interesting to see that dogs don't like me any more than I like them. We keep out of one another's way.

Bankole, on the other hand, likes dogs. He scratches their ears and talks to them. They like him. When he was a boy down south, he kept two or three big ones as pets. Hard to believe that people did that in San Diego or Los Angeles, even thirty or forty years ago.

To please Bankole, I went with him into cold, windy Halstead for a couple of days. I told him it would do no good, but he wanted me to go anyway. I've pleased him so little recently that I agreed to go. He's in love with the place. It's just what he wants: long established, yet modern, familiar, and isolated. There are comfortable big houses—three and four bedrooms. And, thanks to the wind turbines in the hills, along the ridges, there's plenty of electricity most of the time. And there's modern plumbing. We have a little of that now, but it's been a long struggle. Halstead, except for its crumbling coastline, is about as well protected as any town could be. Its population is about 250. That includes the nearest farm families.

Bankole and I have been promised the home of a family who is emigrating—going to homestead in Siberia. Two young-adult sons and the husband of the family have already gone to prepare a place for the women, the younger children, and the grandparents. For this family named Cannon, Bankole's protected, promised land of Halstead is just one more piece of the worn-out, unlivable "old country" that they want to leave behind. They're nice people, but they can't wait to get out of the United States. They say it just doesn't work anymore. The election of Jarret was, for them, the last straw.

And yet the Halstead trip was a good experience for me. I don't get to travel as much as I did before I got pregnant—no salvaging and not as much trading. Bankole nags me to stay home and "behave myself," and most of the

time, I give in.

I had forgotten what living in a big modern house was like. Even the cold and the wind weren't that bad. I kind of liked them. The house rattled and creaked, but it was warmed both by electric heaters and by fires in the fireplaces, and it was set far enough back from the coastal bluffs to be in no danger for many years, if ever.

During the first day, I walked out to the bluffs and stood looking at the Pacific Ocean. We can see the ocean every time we travel up the highway to the Eureka-Arcata area and farther north. Up there, it has washed away long stretches of sand dunes and done real damage along the Humboldt and Arcata Bay coastlines. This is all the fault of the steadily rising level of the sea and of occasional, severe storms.

But still, the sea is beautiful. I stood there in the buffeting wind, staring out at the whitecaps and enjoying the sheer vastness of the water. I didn't hear Bankole come up behind me until he was almost beside me. That says something about how safe I felt. I'm more watchful at home in Acorn.

Bankole put his arm around me, and the wind whipped his beard. He smiled. "It is beautiful, isn't it?"

I nodded. "I wonder how people used to living here are going to like living on the vast Siberian plains, even if the plains are warmer than they once were."

He laughed. "When I was a boy, Siberia was a place where the Russians—the Soviets, we called them then—sent people they thought of as criminals and political troublemakers. If anyone then had said that Americans would be giving up their homes and their citizenship and going to make new lives in Siberia, the rest of us would have looked around for a straitjacket for him."

“I suspect it’s a human characteristic not to know when you’re well off,” I said.

He glanced at me sidewise. “Oh, it is,” he said. “I see it every day.”

I laughed, wrapped an arm around him, and we went back to the Cannon house to a meal of broiled fish, boiled potatoes, Brussels sprouts, and baked apples. The Cannon house sits on a large lot, and, like Bankole and I, the Cannons raise much of their own food. What they can’t raise, they buy from local farmers or fishermen. They’re also part of a cooperative that evaporates salt for their own use and for sale. But unlike us, they use few wild foods or seasonings—no acorns, cactus fruit, mint, manzanita, not even pine nuts. Surely there will be new foods in Siberia. Would they learn to eat them or would they cling to whatever they could grow or buy of their bland familiar foods?

“Sometimes I can’t stand the thought of leaving this house,” Thea Cannon said as we sat eating. “But there’ll be more opportunity for the children when we leave. What is there for them here?”

I’m not so pregnant that most people notice, and I do wear loose clothing now. But I did think that Thea Cannon, who has seven kids of her own, would have noticed. Maybe she’s just too wrapped up in her own worries. She’s a plump, pretty, tired-looking blond woman in her forties, and she always seems a little distracted—as though she has a lot on her mind.

That night, I lay awake beside Bankole, listening to the sounds of the sea and the wind. They’re good sounds as long as you don’t have to be outside. Back at Acorn, being on watch during rough weather is no joke.

“The mayor tells me the town is willing to hire you to

replace one of their teachers," Bankole said, his mouth near my ear and his hand on my stomach where he likes to rest it. "They've got one teacher who's in her late fifties and one who's 79. The older one has been wanting to retire for years. When I told them that you had pretty much set up the school at Acorn and that you taught there, they almost cheered."

"Did you tell them that all I've got is a high school education, a lot of reading, and the courses I audited on my father's computer?"

"I told them. They don't care. If you can help their kids learn enough to pass the high school equivalency tests, they'll figure you've earned your pay. And by the way, they can't actually pay you much in hard currency, but they're willing to let you go on living in the house and raising food in the garden even after I'm dead."

I moved against him, but managed not to say anything. I hate to hear him always talking about dying.

"Aside from the older teacher," he continued, "no one around here has a teaching credential. The older people who do have college degrees *do not* want second or third careers teaching school. Just install some reading, writing, math, history, and science in these kids' heads, and everyone will be happy. You should be able to do it in your sleep after what you've had to put up with in Acorn."

"In my sleep," I said. "That sounds like one definition of life in hell."

He took his hand off my stomach.

"This place is wonderful," I said. "And I love you for trying to provide it for the baby and me. But there's nothing here but existence. I can't give up Acorn and Earthseed to come here and install a dab of education into kids who don't really need me."

“Your child will need you.”

“I know.”

He said nothing more. He turned over and lay with his back to me. After a while I slept. I don’t know whether he did.

Later, back at home, we didn’t talk much. Bankole was angry and unforgiving. He has not yet said a firm “No” to the people of Halstead. That troubles me. I love him and I believed he loves me, but I can’t help knowing that he could settle in Halstead without me. He’s a self-sufficient man, and he truly believes he’s right. He says I’m being childish and stubborn.

Marc agrees with him, by the way, not that either of us has asked Marc what he thinks. But he’s still staying with us, and he can’t help hearing at least some of our disagreement. He could have avoided mixing in, but I don’t think that ever occurred to him.

“What’s the matter with you?” he demanded of me this morning just before Gathering. “Why do you want to have a baby in this dump? Just think, you could live in a real house in a real town.”

And I got so angry so fast that my only choices were either to be very quiet or to scream at him. He, of all people should have known better than to say such a thing. We had reached out from our *dump* with money made at our *dump*. We had found him and freed him. But for us and our dump, he would still be a slave and a whore!

“Come to Gathering,” I said in almost a whisper. And I walked out of the house away from him.

He followed me to Gathering, but he never apologized. I don’t think he ever realized that he had said something vile.

After Gathering, Gray Mora came up to me and said, “I hear you’re leaving.”

I was surprised. I don’t suppose I should have been. Bankole and I don’t scream at one another and broadcast our troubles the way the Figueroas and the Faircloths do, but no doubt it’s clear to everyone that there’s something wrong between us. And then there was Marc. He might tell people—just out of a need to be important. He does have a consuming need to be important, to reassert his manhood.

“I’m not leaving,” I told Gray.

He frowned. “You sure? I heard you were moving to Halstead.”

“I’m not leaving.”

He drew in a long breath and let it out. “Good. This place would probably go to hell without you.” And he turned and walked away. That was Gray. I thought back when he joined us that he might be trouble, or that he wouldn’t stay. Instead, he turned out to be dependability itself—as long as you didn’t want a lot of conversation or demonstrative friendliness. If you were loyal to Gray and his family, he was loyal to you.

Later, after dinner, Zahra Balter pulled me out of a set of dramatic readings that three of the older kids were giving of their own work or of published work that they liked. I was enjoying Gray’s stepdaughter Tori Mora’s reading of some comic poetry that she had written. The more laughter in Acorn, the better. And I was drawing Tori, tall and lean and angular, a handsome girl rather than a pretty one. I had discovered that drawing was so different from everything else I did that it relaxed me, and at the same time, it roused me to a new alertness—a new kind of alertness. I’ve begun to perceive color and texture, line and shape, light and shadow with new intensity. I go into these focused,

trancelike states and draw really terrible stuff. My friends laugh at the drawings, but they tell me they're getting better, getting recognizable. Zahra told me a couple of weeks ago that a drawing I'd done of Harry looked almost human.

But this time Zahra hadn't come to talk about my drawing.

"So you're going to leave!" she hissed at me as soon as we were alone. She looked angry and bitter. Here and there around us, people found their own Gathering Day amusements. May was teaching Mercy Noyer how to weave a small basket from tree bark. A few adults and older kids had gotten a soccer game going in spite of the cold. Marc and Jorge were out there on opposite sides, having a great time running up and down the field, getting filthy, and collecting more than their share of bruises. Travis, who also loves soccer, has said, "I think those two would kill each other for a chance to score."

If only Marc would confine himself to scoring in soccer.

Of course, I wasn't as surprised at Zahra's question as I had been at Gray's. "Zee, I'm not leaving," I said.

Like Gray, she didn't believe me at first. "I heard you were. Your brother said…Lauren, tell me the truth!"

"Bankole wants me to move to Halstead," I said. "You know that. I don't want to go. I think we've got something worthwhile going here, and it's ours."

"I heard they offered you a house by the ocean?"

"Within sight of the ocean, but not that close. You don't want to be too close to the ocean in Halstead."

"But a real house, I mean. A house like back in Robledo."

"Yes."

"And you turned them down?"

“Yes.”

“You’re crazy as hell.”

That did startle me. “You mean you want me to go, Zee?”

“Don’t be stupid. You’re the closest thing I got to a sister. You know damned well I don’t want you to go. But… you should go.”

“I’m not.”

“I would.”

I stared at her.

“I’d go to a better place if I could. I got two kids. Where do they go from here? Where’s your little baby going from here?”

“Where would they go from Halstead? Halstead is like Robledo with a better wall. Why do you think there are people there who are planning to emigrate to Russia or Alaska and others who are just trying to hang on to their little piece of the twentieth century until they die? None of them is trying to build anything to replace what we’ve lost or to boost us to something better.”

“You mean like Earthseed? The Destiny?”

“Yes.”

“It ain’t enough.”

“It’s a beginning. It’s a way of trying to build tomorrow instead of cycling back into some form of yesterday.”

“Do you ever stop preaching?”

“Am I wrong?”

She shrugged. “You know I’m not religious the way you are. Besides, even if you go to Halstead, we’ll still be here. And Earthseed will still be Earthseed.”

Would it? Maybe. But Earthseed is a young movement. I couldn’t walk away and leave it to a “maybe.” I *wouldn’t* walk away from it any more than I’d walk away from the

baby I would soon be having.

Someday, I want people to go from here and teach Earthseed. And I want what they teach to still be recognizable as Earthseed.

"I'm not going," I said. "And, Zee, I think you're a liar. I don't think you'd go either. You know that here at Acorn we're with you if you get into trouble. And you know we would take care of your kids if anything happened to you and Harry. Who else would do that?" She had been raised in some of the nastier streets of Los Angeles, and she knew about loyalty, about depending on her friends and having them depend on her.

She looked at me, then looked away. "It's good here," she said, staring out toward the hills to the west of us. "It's better than I thought it could be when we got here. But you know it's nothing like as good as we had back in Robledo. For your baby's sake, you ought to go."

"For my baby's sake, I'm staying."

And she met my eyes again. "You sure? Think about the future."

"I'm sure. And you know damned well I am thinking about the future."

She was silent for a moment. Then she sighed. "Good." Another silence. "You're right. I wouldn't want to go, and I wouldn't want you to go either. Maybe that's because I'm as big a fool as you are. I don't know. But…we do have something good here. Acorn and Earthseed—they're both too good to let go of." She grinned. "How's Bankole dealing with things?"

"Not well."

"No. He tries to give you what any sane woman would want and you don't want it. Poor guy."

She went away, smiling. I was heading back to the

reading and my sketch pad when Jorge Cho came up to me, sweaty and filthy from the game. He was with his girlfriend Diamond Scott, tiny and black and every hair in place as usual. I saw the question on their faces before Jorge spoke.

"Is it true that you're leaving?"

THURSDAY, JANUARY 20, 2033

Jarret was inaugurated today.

We listened to his speech—short and rousing. Plenty of "America, America, God shed his grace on thee," and "God bless America," and "One nation, indivisible, under God," and patriotism, law, order, sacred honor, flags everywhere, Bibles everywhere, people waving one of each. His sermon —because that's what it was—was from Isaiah, Chapter One. "Your country is desolate, your cities are burned with fire: your land, strangers devour it in your presence, and it is desolate as overthrown by strangers."

And then, "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they will be as wool. If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land. But if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it."

Then, he spoke of peace, rebuilding and healing. "A strong Christian America," he said, "needs strong Christian American soldiers to reunite, rebuild, and defend it." In almost the same breath, he spoke of both "the generosity and the love that we must show to one another, to all of our fellow Christian Americans," and "the destruction we must visit upon traitors and sinners, those destroyers in our midst."

I'd call it a fire-and-brimstone speech, but what happens now?

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 6, 2033

Yesterday Marc told Bankole that he intended to hold services of his own on Gathering Day. He would, he said, speak just before our regular gathering. It seemed that he was remembering his time with the Durans in Robledo, remembering his carport church, and wanting to recapture that image of himself.

Bankole sent him to me. "Don't go out of your way to make trouble," Bankole told him. "Your sister has been good to you. Tell her what you intend to do."

"She can't stop me!" my brother said.

"Do what's right," Bankole told him. "You have a conscience. Don't go behind your sister's back."

So later in the day, Marc found me sitting with Channa Ryan, sorting and cataloging books. We're always behind in that, and it needs to be done. All of our kids work on projects as part of their education. Each kid does at least one group project and one individual project per year. Most kids find the two unrelated projects influencing one another in unexpected ways. This helps the kids begin to learn how the world works, how all sorts of things interact and influence one another. The kids begin to teach themselves and one another. They begin to learn how to learn. With their mentors' help, they each choose some aspect of history, science, math, art, or whatever and learns it well enough to teach it. Then they do just that. They teach it. To do a good job, they need to be able to find out what information we have available here and what they're going

to have to go to the nets for. Since we aren't rich yet, the more we can offer them from our own library, the better.

Still, cataloging is tedious. I was almost glad when Marc came and interrupted my work. He and I went outside to talk.

"I want to get back to what I really care about," he said as we sat together on a handsome bench that Allie Gilchrist had made. Allie's discovered a real liking for building furniture, and she's worked as hard to learn to do it well as she has to learn to assist Bankole well.

"What?" I asked Marc, hoping that what he wanted was something that we could accommodate. No one wanted more than I did for him to find his own interests and get into work that he cared about.

"I want to start my church again," he said. "I want to preach. I'm not asking your permission. I'm just letting you know. With
Jarret in office, you need someone like me anyway so that you'll be able to say you're not a Satanist cult."

I sighed. All of a sudden I could feel myself all but sagging with weariness and dread. But I only said, "If Jarret noticed us and wanted to call us a Satanic cult, your preaching wouldn't stop him. Would you be willing to speak *at* Gathering?"

That surprised him. "You mean while you're having your services?"

"Yes."

"I won't talk about Earthseed. I want to preach."

"Preach, then."

"What's the catch?"

"You should know. You've been to our services. You choose the topic. You say what you want. But afterward there will be questions and discussion."

“I’m not out to teach a class. I want to preach a sermon.”

“That’s not our way, Marc. If you speak, you have to face questions and discussion. You need to be ready for that. Besides, no matter what you call it, a good sermon is just a lesson that you’re trying to teach.”

“But…you won’t try to get in the way of my preaching at the Gathering if I take questions afterward?”

“That’s right.”

“Then I’ll do it.”

“It’s no joke, Marc.”

“I know. It’s no joke to me either.”

“I mean we’re as serious about the discussion as you are about the sermon. Some of our people might probe and dissect in ways you won’t like.”

“Okay, I can handle it.”

No, I didn’t think he could. But an unpleasant thing should be done quickly if it must be done at all. My brother had a sermon ready. He’d been working on it in his spare moments. Since I was scheduled to speak at the Gathering this morning, I was able to step aside for him, let him speak at once.

He didn’t pull his punches. He confronted us, challenged us directly from the Bible—first from Isaiah again, “The grass withereth, the flower fadeth; but the word of our God will stand for ever.” Then later from Malachi, “For I am the Lord. I change not.” And then from Hebrews, “Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and for ever. Be not carried about with diverse and strange doctrines.”

Marc doesn’t have our father’s impressive voice, and he knows it. He uses what he has skillfully, and, of course, it helps that he’s so good-looking. But once he had preached his sermon on the changelessness of God, Jorge Cho spoke

up. Jorge was next to Diamond Scott as usual. He has told me he intends to marry Di, but Di has been looking at my brother in a way that Jorge doesn't like at all. There's a rivalry between Marc and Jorge anyway. They're both young and competitive.

"We believe that all things change," Jorge said, "even though all things don't necessarily change in all ways. Why do you believe God doesn't change?"

My brother smiled. "But even you believe that your God doesn't change. Your God promotes change, but he stays the same."

That surprised me. Marc shouldn't have made such avoidable mistakes. He's had plenty of time to read, talk, and hear about Earthseed, but somehow, he's misunderstood.

Travis was the first to point out the error. "God is Change," he said. "God *promotes* nothing. Nothing at all."

And Zahra, of all people, said, "Our God isn't male. Change has no sex. Marc, you don't know enough about us yet even to criticize us."

Jorge began repeating his question before Zahra had finished. "Why do you think your God doesn't change? How can you prove it?"

"I have faith that it's true," Marc said. "Belief must be based on faith as much as on proofs."

"But there must be some test," Jorge said. "You must have a way to know when your faith is sensible and when it makes no sense."

"The test is the Bible, of course. When the Bible tells us something—in this case, it tells us several times—we can believe it. We can have faith that it is true."

Antonio Cortez, Lucio's oldest nephew, jumped in. "Look," he said, "in the Bible, God does things. Things

happen and he reacts. He makes things. He gets angry. He destroys things…."

"But he, himself, doesn't change," my brother said.

"Oh, come on," Tori Mora shouted in open disgust. "To take action is to change. It's to go from action to inaction. And he goes from calmness to anger—he gets angry a lot. And—"

"And in Genesis," her stepsister Doe said, "he lets some of his favorite men have children with their sisters or daughters. Then in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, he says anyone who does that should be killed."

"Right," Jorge said. "I was just reading that last week. It is no good to say that something is true because the Bible says it is true and then forget that a few pages later, the Bible says—or shows—something completely different."

"Every time any god is accepted by a new group of people, that god changes," Harry Balter said.

"I think," Marta Figueroa Castro said in her gentlest voice, "that the verses you read, Marc, mean that God is always God, always there for us, always dependable that way. And, of course, it means that God and God's word will never die."

"Yes, so much of the Bible is metaphor," Diamond Scott said. She, too, spoke very gently. "I remember that my mother used to try to take it absolutely literally, but it just meant she had to ignore some things and twist others." Beside her, Jorge smiled.

The discussion went on for a while longer. Then other people began to take pity on Marc. They let him end the discussion. They had never been out to humiliate him. Well, maybe Jorge had, but even Jorge had been polite. Things would have gone better for Marc if he had done his homework, and things would have been more interesting

and involving for his audience. He might even have won over a Faircloth or a Peralta. I had worried about that.

The truth is, I let him speak today because I wanted him to speak before he was truly ready. I wish I hadn't had to do that. I wish he had wanted to do something else—anything else—to get his self-respect back and begin to rebuild himself. I have tried to interest him in the several kinds of work we do here. He isn't lazy. He pulls his weight. But he doesn't like fieldwork or working with animals or trading or teaching or salvaging or carpentry. He tried repairing salvaged tools, but it bothered him that he had so much to learn even about simple things. He all but ruined a pair of heavy-duty shears that he was supposed to be sharpening. He tried to grind their almost square edges to thin, sharp blades, and Travis gave him the chewing out he deserved.

"If you don't know, *ask*," Travis had shouted. "Nobody expects you to know everything. Just ask! This shit is easy to do if you just take the trouble to learn a few basics. Work with me for a while. Don't try to go off on your own."

But my brother needed to "go off on his own," to have his own turf where he was the one who said yes or no, and where everyone respected him. He needed that more than he needed anything, and he meant to have it all at once.

But now, instead of feeling important and proud, he feels angry and embarrassed. I had to let him inflict those feelings on himself. I couldn't let him begin to divide Acorn. More important—much more important—I couldn't let him begin to divide Earthseed.

NINE

From EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING

To make peace with others,
Make peace with yourself:
Shape God With generosity
And compassion.
Minimize harm.
Shield the weak.
Treasure the innocent.
Be true to the Destiny.
Forgive your enemies.
Forgive yourself.

MY MOTHER WAS QUITE open in her journal about the fact that she didn't know what she was doing, and that this was a terrible frustration to her. She meant to make Earthseed a nationwide movement, but she had no idea how to do this. She seemed to have vague plans to someday send out Earthseed missionaries, to use Acorn as a kind of school for such missionaries. Perhaps this is what she would have done if she'd had the chance. It might even have worked. It's worked for other cults. It might have gained her a larger following, more recognition.

But she didn't want simple recognition. She wanted people to *believe.* She had a truth that she wanted to teach and an outer-space Destiny that she wanted taken seriously and someday fulfilled. And it's obvious from her treatment of Uncle Marc that she was very

territorial about the whole thing. I don't know whether Uncle Marc ever realized how she set him up to fail and to make a bad first impression with her people. Such a simple, subtle thing. He imagined that she had done something much more obvious and complicated.

She didn't fight people unless she was pretty sure she was going to win. When she wasn't sure, she found ways to avoid fighting or go along with her opponents until they tripped themselves up or put themselves in a position for her to trip them up. Smart, I suppose—or treacherous, depending on your point of view.

She learned from everyone and everything. I think if I had died at birth, she would have managed to learn something from my death that would be useful to Earthseed.

FROM *The Journals of Lauren Oya Olamina*
SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 2033

I feel more strongly than I ever have that there will soon be war. President Jarret is still stirring up bad feelings over Alaska, or as he describes it, "our truant forty-ninth state." He paints Alaska's President Leontyev and the Alaskan legislature as the real enemies—as "that gang of traitors and thieves who are trying to steal a vast, rich portion of these *United* States for themselves. These people want to treat all of Alaska as their own personal, private property. Can we let them get away with it? Can we let them cheat us, rob us, destroy our country, use our sacred constitution as waste paper? Can we forget that 'If a house be divided against itself, that house cannot stand?' Jesus Christ spoke those words 2000 years ago. President Abraham Lincoln

paraphrased them in 1858. Was Lincoln wrong? Was—dare we ask it? Dare we imagine it? Was Christ wrong? Was our Lord, wrong?"

He's so good at asking nasty rhetorical questions—so good at encouraging young men—not young women, only men—to "Do your duty, to your country and to yourselves. Prove yourselves men worthy to be called good Christian American soldiers. Serve your country, now that it has such great need of you." They're to do all this by joining the armed services. I've never heard a president talk this way—although I have read about presidents and leaders of other nations who talked this way when they were preparing for war. Jarret said nothing about drafting people, but Bankole says that may be next. Bankole was down in Sacramento a couple of days ago, and he says a lot of people think it's "time we taught that bunch of traitors up in Alaska a lesson."

It shouldn't be so easy to nudge people toward what might be their own destruction.

"Who was doing the talking?" I asked him as he unpacked medical supplies. He keeps most of his supplies in our cabin until they're needed at the clinic. That way they're less likely to tempt children or thieves. "I mean, was it most of the people you talked to or just a few?"

"Mostly men," he said. "Some young and some old enough to know better. I think a lot of the younger ones would like a war. War is exciting. A boy can prove himself, become a man—if he lives. He'll be given a gun and trained to shoot people. He'll be a powerful part of a powerful team. Chances are, he won't think about the people who'll be shooting back at him, bombing him, or otherwise trying to kill him until he faces them."

I thought about the young single men of Acorn—Jorge

Cho, Esteban Peralta, Antonio Figueroa, and even my brother Marc, and shook my head. “Did you ever want to go to war?” I asked.

“Never,” Bankole answered. “I wanted to be a healer. I was damned idealistic about it. Believe me, that was a daunting enough challenge for a young Black boy in the late twentieth century—much harder than learning to kill. It never occurred to me back in the 1990s when I was in medical school that in spite of my ideals, I would have to learn to do both.”

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2033

Marc spoke at Gathering yesterday. This is the third time he’s done it. Each time he learns more about Earthseed and tries harder to convince us that our beliefs are nonsense. He seems to have decided that the unity, the Christianity and the hope that Jarret has brought to the country makes Jarret not the monster we all feared but a potential savior. The country, he tells us, must get back to God or it is finished.

“The Earthseed Destiny,” he said yesterday, “is an airy nothing. The country is bleeding to death in poverty, slavery, chaos, and sin. This is the time for us to work for our salvation, not to divert our attention to fantasy explorations of extrasolar worlds.”

Travis, trying to explain, said, “The Destiny is important for the lessons it forces us to learn while we’re here on Earth, for the people it encourages us to become. It’s important for the unity and purpose that it gives us here on Earth. And in the future, it offers us a kind of species adulthood and species immortality when we scatter to the

stars."

My brother laughed. "If you're looking for immortality in outer space," he said, "you've been misled. You already have an immortal soul, and where that soul spends eternity is up to you. Remember the Tower of Babel! You can follow Earthseed, build your way to go to the stars, fall down into chaos, and wind up in hell! Or you can follow the will of God. And if you follow God's will, you can live forever, secure and happy, in God's true heaven."

Zahra Balter, loyal in spite of her personal beliefs, spoke up before I could. "Marc," she said, "if we have immortal souls, don't you think we'll take them with us even if we go to the stars?"

"Why do you find it so easy," Michael Kardos asked, "to believe we go to heaven after we die, but so hard to believe we can go into the heavens while we're alive? Following the Earthseed Destiny is difficult. Massively difficult. That's the challenge. But if we want to do it, someday we'll do it. It's not impossible."

I had spoken the same words to him shortly after he came to live at Acorn. He had said then with bitter contempt that the Destiny was meaningless. All he wanted to do, he said, was to earn enough money to house, feed, and clothe his family. Once he was able to do that, he said, then maybe he'd have time for science fiction.

Indeed.

SUNDAY, MARCH 6, 2033

Marc has gone.

He left yesterday with the Peraltas. They're gone for good too. They were the ones Marc managed to reach.

They've always felt that we should be more Christian and more patriotic. They say Andrew Jarret is our elected leader —Ramiro Peralta and his daughter Pilar helped elect him— and a minister of God, so he deserves our respect. Esteban Peralta is going to enlist in the army. He believes—the whole family believes—it's our patriotic duty, everyone's duty, to support Jarret in his "heroic" effort to revive and reunify the country. They don't believe Jarret's a fascist. They don't believe that the church burnings, witch burnings, and other abuses are Jarret's doing. "Some of his followers are young and excitable," Ramiro Peralta says. "Jarret will put their asses into uniform. Then they'll learn some discipline. Jarret hates all this chaos the way I hate it. That's why I voted for him. Now he'll start putting things right!"

It's true that there haven't been any burnings or beatings since Jarret was inaugurated—or none that I've heard of, and I've been paying attention to the news. I don't know what this means, but I don't believe it means everything's all right. I don't think the Peraltas believe it either. I think they're just scared, and getting out of any potential line of fire. If Jarret does crack down on people who don't fit into his religious notions, they don't want to be here at Acorn.

My brother on the other hand, used to despise Jarret. Now he says Jarret is just what America needs. And I'm afraid that it's me he's begun to despise. He blames me for the failure of his Gathering Day sermons. He's gained no followers. The Peraltas like him and sort of agree with him. Pilar Peralta is more than half in love with him, but even they don't see him as a minister. They see him as a nice boy. In fact, that's the way most people here in Acorn see him. He thinks this is my fault. He believes, he insists, that I

coached people to attack and humiliate him at all three Gatherings. And he says with a weary, irritating, *honest* smile, “I forgive you. I might have done the same thing to protect my turf if I had any turf to protect.”

I think it was the smile that made me say more than I should have. “The truth is,” I told him, “you were given a special privilege. If you were anyone else, you could have been expelled for preaching another belief system. I let you do it because you’ve been through so much hell, and I knew it was important to you. And because you’re my brother.” I would have called back the words if I could have. He would hear pity in them. He would hear condescension.

For a long moment, he stared at me. I watched him get angry—very angry. Then he seemed to push his anger away. He refused to react to it. He shrugged.

“Think of the Gatherings you’ve attended,” I said to him. “Name even one that didn’t involve questions, challenges, argument. It’s our way. I did warn you. Anyone can be questioned on any subject they choose to teach or advocate. I told you that we were serious about it. We learn at least as much by discussion as by lecture, demonstration, or experience.”

“Forget about it,” he said. “It’s done. I don’t blame you. Really. I shouldn’t have tried my hand here. I’ll make a place for myself somewhere else.”

Still no anger expressed. Yet he was furious. He wouldn’t show it and he wouldn’t talk about it, but it came off him like heat. Perhaps that’s what a collar teaches—a horrible kind of self-control. Or perhaps not. My brother was always a self-contained person. He knew how to be unreachable.

I sighed and gave him as much money as I could afford, plus a rifle, a sidearm, and ammunition for both. He’s not a

very good shot with anything yet, but he knows the basics, and I couldn't let him go out and wind up in the hands of someone like Cougar again. The Peralta family had been with us for two years, so they had money and possessions as a result of their work with us. Marc did not. We drove him and the Peraltas into Eureka. There, they might find homes and jobs, or at least they might find temporary shelter until they could decide what to do.

"I thought you knew me," I said to my brother just before he left us. "I wouldn't do what you're accusing me of."

He shrugged. "It's okay. Don't keep worrying about it." He smiled. And he was gone.

I don't know how to feel about this. So many people have come here and stayed or wanted to stay even if, for some reason, they couldn't. I had to expel a thief a year ago, and he cried and begged to stay. We had caught him stealing drugs from Bankole's medical supplies, so he had to go, but he cried.

As they left us, even the Peraltas looked grim and frightened. They were Ramiro, the father; Pilar, 18; Esteban, 17; and Eva, who was only two and whose birth at a rest stop along the highway had cost her mother's life. They had no other relatives left alive, no friends outside of Acorn who would help them if they got into trouble. And Esteban would be leaving them soon to enlist. They had good reason to look worried.

Marc would be in the same situation once he left us. Worse, he would be all alone. Yet he smiled.

I don't know whether I'll ever see him again. I feel almost as though he's died…died again.

THURSDAY, MARCH 17, 2033

Dan Noyer found his way back to us last night.

He came back. Amazing. I think he's been gone longer than he was with us. We tried to find him—for his little sisters' sakes as much as for his. But unless you have the money to hire a small army of private cops like that guy in Texas, finding people in today's chaos is almost impossible. My finding Marcus was an accident. Anyway, Dan came home on his own, poor boy.

It was a cold night. We had all gone to bed except for the first watch of the night.

The watchers were Gray Mora and Zahra Balter.

Zahra was the one who spotted the intruders. As she described it to me later, she saw two people running, staggering, sometimes seeming to hold one another up. If not for the staggering, Zahra might have fired a warning shot, at least. But before she revealed herself, she wanted to see who or what the runners were escaping from.

As she scanned the hills behind them, she tapped out our emergency signal on her phone.

There were five people chasing the staggering runners —or, with her night-vision glasses, she could see five. She kept looking for more.

One of the five shouted, then fell, and Zahra realized that that one must have blundered into the edge of our thorn fence. In the dark, some of our thorn bushes don't look that savage. They're pretty if you don't touch them. Some will even be covered with flowers soon. But they grab clothing and flesh, and they tear.

The injured one's four companions slowed, seemed to hesitate, then sped up again as the injured one limped after them.

Zahra put her rifle on automatic and fired a short burst across the path of the two front runners. They stopped short

and dived into the thorn bushes and cactuses. One began to fire in Zahra's general direction. There were shouts of pain and loud curses. Then all five were shooting. Down in Acorn, we could hear the gunfire. Even without the phone, we would have known that it was coming from the area around Zahra's watch station.

Zahra and Harry are my oldest friends, and I'm Change-sister to them and Change-aunt to their kids Tabia and Russell. For that reason, I paid no attention to Bankole when he told me to stay in the house. I remember thinking that if this were another Dovetree-like raid, staying inside was only asking to burn.

But this didn't sound like what happened at Dovetree. It wasn't loud enough. There weren't enough attackers. This sounded like a small gang raid of a kind we hadn't had for years.

Bankole and I slipped out of the house together and headed for the truck. For most of the run, we were protected by the bulk first of our own cabin, then of the school. I suppose that's why Bankole didn't try as hard as he might have to make me stay behind. We couldn't be seen, let alone shot at. We keep the truck parked in its own space on the south side of the school. It's protected there in the center of the community, and during the day we can spread its solar wings and let it recharge its batteries.

Harry Balter reached the truck just as Bankole and I got there. He opened a side door, and all three of us scrambled in.

Harry and I have gotten comfortable with the truck's computers. In our earlier lives down south, we both used our parents' computers. We're unusual. Most adults at Acorn had never touched or even seen a computer before. Still others are afraid of them. For now, although we're passing

on our knowledge, we're still among the few who take full advantage of what the truck can do with its weapons, maneuverability, and sensory systems.

We turned everything on, and Bankole drove us toward Zahra's current watch station. As we rode, we used the truck's infrared viewer to locate each of the intruders. Bankole is a good, steady driver, and he has confidence in the truck's armor. It didn't seem to bother him at all that people were shooting at us. In fact, it was a good thing the intruders were wasting ammunition on us. That gave Zahra some relief.

Then we had a look around, and we decided that one of the intruders was much too close to Zahra—and creeping closer. He could have been trying to get away, but he wasn't. None of them were. We made sure the targets we had identified were, in fact, targets, and not our own people. Once we were sure, we pointed them out to the truck and let it open up on them. Along with the trucks ability to "see" in the dark via infrared, ambient light, or radar, it also has very good "hearing," and an incorrectly designated sense of "smell." This last is based on spectroscopic analysis rather than on actual smelling, but it is a kind of chemical analysis over a distance. It could be used on anything that emitted or reflected electromagnetic radiation—light—of some kind.

And the truck had plenty of memory. It could, and had, recorded all that it could of each of us—our voices, hand and foot prints, retinal prints, body sounds, and our general shapes in several positions to help it recognize us and not shoot us.

When the truck began shooting, I left the forward monitors to Harry. I didn't need to see anything that might make me useless, and the truck didn't need any more help

from me. Once we were between Zahra and the attackers, I checked Zahra on an aft screen. She was alive and still at her station. Most of her body was concealed within the depression and behind the stone shelter that was intended to shield her. Some distance away, Gray Mora was still at his station and still alive. He wasn't involved in this, and his duty was to hold his position and guard the other most likely approach to Acorn. It had taken a while for us to learn not to be distracted by people who might rattle the front door while their friends slipped in through the back.

The intruder nearest to Zahra was dead. According to the truck, he was no longer changing the chemistry of the air in his immediate vicinity in a way that indicated breathing, and he wasn't moving. Once the truck was stopped, its ability to detect motion was as good as its hearing. Put the two together and we could detect breathing and heartbeat—or their absence. We've tried to trick it—fool it into mistaking one of us playing dead for an actual corpse—and we've never been able to. That's comforting.

"All right," Harry said, looking up from his screen. "How's Zee?"

"Alive," I told him. "Are all the shooters down?"

"Down and dead, all five of them." He drew a deep breath. "Bankole, let's go pick up Zahra."

"Has anyone given Gray an all-clear?" I asked.

"I have," Bankole answered. "You know, I've got the next watch. In another hour, I would have relieved Zahra."

"For the rest of the night," I said, "whoever's on duty should watch from the truck. Whoever these guys are, they might have friends."

Bankole nodded.

He stopped us as close to Zahra's watch station as the truck could get. We all took one more look around, then

Harry opened the door. Before we could call her, Zahra darted from cover and jumped into the truck. She was bleeding from the left side of her face and neck, and that took me by surprise. At once, I felt pain in my own face and neck, but managed not to react. Habit. Harry grabbed Zahra and yelled for Bankole.

"I'm okay," Zahra said. "I just got hit by broken rock when those guys were shooting. There was rock flying everywhere."

I went up to take Bankole's place, and he went back to check on her. I'm a pretty decent driver now, so I got us back to the houses. "I'll take what's left of Zahra's watch," I said. "Your watch, too, Bankole. I think you're going to be busy."

"Watch from the truck!" Bankole ordered as though I hadn't just made the same suggestion myself.

"Of course."

"Whatever happened to the two people those gunmen were chasing?" Zahra asked.

We all looked at her.

"They were staggering toward Acorn," she said. "They couldn't have gotten far. I didn't shoot them. They were already hurt."

This was the first we knew of the running pair. Zahra thought they were both wounded, and both men. Yet we hadn't spotted them. Of course, we hadn't looked back toward Acorn for more intruders. I hadn't even used the aft screens to do that. Stupid of me.

We looked around Acorn now, and found the usual signs of life—plenty of heat and some sound from the houses. The people were no doubt watching, but in the middle of the night, they wouldn't come rushing out until they got an all-clear from us. The older kids would be

keeping an eye on the younger ones, and the adults would be watching us. No one was showing a light or moving around where they could be seen. The only loud sound was that of a baby crying from the Douglas house. Even that came to an abrupt stop.

If this had been a drill, it would have been a good drill.

But where were the two runners? Were they hiding? Had they found their way into the school or into one of the houses? Were they crouching behind one of the trees?

Were they armed?

"I don't think they had guns," Zahra said when I asked her.

Then I spotted them—or spotted something. I drove toward it, toward our own cabin, in fact—Bankole's and mine.

"The truck says they're still alive," I said. "They're not moving much, and Zee's right. They're not armed. But they're alive."

The runners were Dan Noyer and a young girl. The moment I saw her—tall like Dan, but slender, pretty, dark-haired with a sharp little chin like Mercy's—I knew she must be one of Dan's sisters. As it turned out, she was Nina Noyer.

Both brother and sister had been beaten bloody with both fists, and with something else. Bankole says they look as though they've been lashed with whips.

"I suppose," he said with great bitterness, "that people who don't have access to convict collars might have to exert themselves—resort to older methods of torture."

Brother and sister have rope burns at their wrists, ankles, and necks. Also, Bankole says, they've suffered a great deal of sexual abuse. The girl told him they were forced "to do it with strangers for money." Dan has endured

even more beating than Nina has, and both have what Bankole calls, “the usual infections and tissue damage.” Nina says she got pregnant, but one night during her captivity, she had a miscarriage. She hadn’t known what was happening, but one of the other slaves told her. Well, I suppose it would be surprising if she hadn’t gotten pregnant. For her sake, I’m glad she miscarried.

And Dan had somehow found her, rescued her, and brought her home in spite of pursuers chasing him right down into our valley. How had one 15-year-old done so very much?

And in the end, what would it cost him? In the end, did that matter?

FRIDAY, MARCH 18, 2033

“This is no way to live,” Bankole said to me when he came in from tending Dan and Nina this morning. He sat at the table and put his head down on his arms.

I had taken his watch, as I promised, to free him to do what he could for Dan and Nina. Allie and May were helping him, since they have all but joined the Noyer family by taking care of Kassia and Mercy for so long.

Bankole had spent most of his time with his two patients, and had once again found himself fighting for Dan’s life. The boy stopped breathing twice, and Bankole revived him. But at last, the young body, once strong and healthy, just gave up. It had taken an incredible amount of abuse over the past few months.

“His heart just quit,” Bankole said. “If I had more modern equipment, maybe….Goddamnit, Olamina, can you see now why I need to get out of here and get you out of

here?"

"He's really dead?" I whispered, not believing it—not wanting to believe it.

"He's dead. It's obscene! A young boy like that."

"What about his sister?"

"She wasn't as badly beaten as he was. I believe she'll be all right."

Would she, after all that had happened? I doubted it. Bankole and I sat silent for a while, each of us thinking our own thoughts. What would it have meant to Dan that he had saved his sister, even though he had not been able to save himself? Did he ever imagine such a thing? Would it somehow have been all right? Enough?

"Where's the other sister—Paula?" I asked. "What happened to her?"

Bankole sighed. "Dead. Some trouble on the road up north around Trinidad. Three men tried to steal her. They got caught. Her owners and the thieves shot it out, and she was in the middle. Nina says her owners just cursed her for getting in the way and getting killed. They left her body lying among the rocks by the sea. Nina said Paula loved the sea when the family saw it for the first time last year. She said she hoped the tide came in and carried her away."

I shook my head. Bankole got up and went to lie on the bed.

"But Dan did it," I said more to myself than to him. "He found his sister, and he brought her home. It was *impossible*, but he did it!"

"Shit," Bankole said, and turned his face to the wall.

Now the long day is over.

We've cleaned up the hillside battlefield and thrown ground pepper over parts of it so that any smell of blood

that still clings to it wouldn't hold the attention of wild dogs.

We've collected the dead, searched their bodies, then after dark, surrounded them with scrap wood, soaked them in lamp oil, and burned them. We do a thorough job, and the smoke is less noticeable at night—less of a lure to scavengers and to the curious.

I hate doing this—burning the dead. Of course, whether they're our dead or someone else's, it has to be done, but I hate it. We burned Dan separate from his attackers. I set his pyre alight myself. Allie chose the verse and spoke it. We'll have a full service for Dan when Nina is well enough to attend. For now, though, I think Allie made a good choice.

"As wind,
As water,
As fire,
As life,
God
Is both creative and destructive,
Demanding and yielding,
Sculptor and clay.
God
Is Infinite Potential.
God
Is Change."

The other dead—the intruders—were four men and a woman, all in their twenties or early thirties. They were dirty and scratched up, but well-dressed, well-armed, well-heeled. They had plenty of Canadian money in their pockets. Were they slavers? Drug dealers? Thieves? Rich

kids slumming? Even Nina wasn't sure. She and Dan had escaped from their original captors and had been on the highway, headed for Acorn when this new group spotted them and came after them.

The intruders weren't carrying identification or even a change of clothing. That means they had homes or a base of some kind nearby. We thought about that and decided to burn their clothing along with their bodies. It's of much better quality than our own—newer, more fashionable, and more expensive. If we wear it, it might be recognized at one of the street markets. And another thing. Two of the intruders were wearing black sweatshirts with white crosses embroidered on them—embroidered, not printed. These weren't the long tunics that Aubrey Dovetree mentioned, but they were interesting imitations. The intruders were thugs of some kind who had decided it was fashionable to look like Jarret's people.

The intruders' guns are, like our own, good-quality, well-cared-for automatic rifles with laser sites. One is German, one's American, and the three newest are Russian. They're all as illegal as hell and as common as oranges. We'll hide them in our survival caches scattered through the mountains. The only thing they had that we'll keep with us and use, as we need it, is some of their money. Most of that will go in the caches too. It's all worn and wrinkled and not identifiable. The fact that there's so much of it—more per person than any group of us would carry around—tells us that these people were either rich or involved in some profitable illegal activity, or both.

Well, now they're gone. People vanish in this world. Even rich people out for fun and greater profit vanish. It happens all the time.

TEN

From EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING

We can,
Each of us,
Do the impossible
As Long as we can convince ourselves
That it has been done before.

LIFE AT ACORN INVOLVED a lot of hard physical work. It says a great deal about the world of the early 2030s that most of the people who stumbled onto the community chose to join Earthseed and stay. That being the case, it must have taken a lot to get the Peralta family to leave. There may have been more reasons than my mother gives for their leaving, but I haven't been able to find evidence of them. Perhaps the Peraltas actually did disagree with the religious and political feelings of the rest of Acorn. Perhaps also, they were afraid of the way the political situation in the country was going. They had reason to be.

On the other hand, I'm not at all surprised that Uncle Marc left. There really was no place for him at Acorn. He was "Olamina's little brother" or, as my mother said, a nice boy. He could have married and begun a family in one more little cabin. That would have been intolerable to him. He was a world saver, after all, like my mother. Or not like her, since Earth was the only world that interested him. Like the

Peraltas, he was in religious and political disagreement with Acorn, and, like the Peraltas, he was probably wise to leave when he did.

I got the impression that my mother didn't pay much attention to being pregnant. It wasn't that she resented it. There's no indication that she did. She simply ignored it. I was due in July. Between running out into the firefight with the thugs who chased Dan and Nina Noyer and actually giving birth to me, she worked hard to increase both Acorn's wholesaling and its retailing businesses. She was so successful at this that by the time I was born, the community was in the process of negotiating to buy another truck. They did eventually buy it. Most people had been nervous about having only the one truck. Travis and his helpers had kept the old housetruck running well, and hadn't had to spend much money on it since they made repairs themselves, but one major accident would put the whole community out of business—or at least out of its new businesses.

With two trucks, the beginnings of a fleet, my mother was looking forward to what she saw as a pleasant, reasonably secure future. She began to think less about Acorn and more about Earthseed—about spreading Earthseed to whole groups of new people. She wrote more than once in her journal that she hoped to use missionaries to make conversions in nearby cities and towns and to build whole new Earthseed communities—clones of Acorn. I think she especially liked this last idea. She even imagined names for the Acorn clones like a girl thinking up names for imaginary children that she hopes to have someday. There was a Hazelnut, a Pine, a Manzanita, a

Sunflower, an Almond.…"They should be small communities," she said. "No more than a few hundred people, never more than a thousand. A community whose population grew to more than a thousand should split and 'parent' a new community."

In small communities, she believed, people are more accountable to one another. Serious misbehavior is harder to get away with, harder even to begin when everyone who sees you knows who you are, where you live, who your family is, and whether you have any business doing what you're doing.

My mother was not a fanciful woman apart from her belief in Earthseed. That, I think, was why the people of Acorn trusted her so. She was practical, straightforward, fair, honest, and she liked people. She enjoyed working with them. She was a better-than-average community leader. But beneath it all was always Earthseed and a longing, an obsession, that was far stronger than anyone seemed to realize. People who are intelligent, ambitious, and at the same time, in the grip of odd obsessions can be dangerous. When they occur, they inevitably upset things.

In *The First Book of the Living,* my mother says,

> ***Prodigy is, in its essence, adaptability and persistent, positive obsession. Without persistence, what remains is an enthusiasm of the moment. Without adaptability, what remains may be channeled into destructive fanaticism. Without positive obsession, there is nothing at all.***

FROM *The Journals of Lauren Oya Olamina*
FRIDAY, JULY 22, 2033

On July 20, I turned 24. More important, on that day my daughter Larkin Beryl Ife Olamina Bankole was born.

We've named her all that, poor little one. "Larkin" is from the same root as "Lauren" and my father's name, "Laurence." All three names derive from "Laurel" and that from the ancient Greek habit of rewarding the victorious by crowning them with wreaths of laurel leaves. And there is a pleasant similarity between "Larkin" and "lark," the name of a songbird that neither Bankole nor I have ever seen or heard, but whose voice, we have read, is beautiful. I had planned to call our daughter Larkin even before she was born on my and my father's birthday. What a lovely connection. Three generations of beginning on July 20 is more than just a coincidence. It's almost a tradition.

"Beryl" was the name of Bankole's mother. Bankole and I had been bickering over it for months, and I had known that it would show up somewhere in our daughter's name. As long as it wasn't her first name, it was endurable. It has a good denotative meaning. A beryl is a very hard clear or cloudy mineral which, when properly shaped and polished, has great potential for beauty. The emerald is a kind of beryl.

"Ife" is the Yoruba personal name we've chosen to go with our two Yoruba surnames—since my grandfather and Bankole's father had chosen to take Yoruba surnames back in the 1960s. "Ife" was Bankole's idea. I didn't remember it. We had pooled our memories of Yoruba names, and as soon as Bankole came up with "Ife," it seemed right to both of us. It means "love," Bankole says.

And, of course, she was "Olamina" and "Bankole." So

many names for one little girl. When she's older, she'll no doubt choose a couple of them and drop the others.

She's whole and beautiful and healthy, and I love her more than I would have thought possible. I'm still sore and tired, but it doesn't matter. She weighs three and a half kilos, has a big appetite, and a good loud voice.

Bankole sits, now, holding her as she sleeps—holding her and looking down at her, rocking her in the beautiful, ornate wooden rocking chair that Gray Mora paid Allie Gilchrist to make for him. Gray likes to build big things—cabins, storehouses, buildings of any kind. He designs them, organizes the building, and works on them. As long as he's building something, he's a happy man. The school is his doing, and if he were any more proud of it, he'd be impossible. But he leaves the designing and building of small things, furniture in particular, to Allie Gilchrist. She taught herself her craft not only by reading salvaged books, but by taking apart salvaged furniture to see how it was made. Now, at street markets, she sells the chairs, tables, cabinets, chests, toys, tools, and decorative items that she makes, and she gets good prices for them. Her son Justin is only nine, but he's already pleased her very much by picking the work up from her, learning it and enjoying it. May and the Noyer girls are also beginning to learn the craft, although May is more interested in weaving grasses, roots, bark, and other fibers into mats, baskets, and bags.

Four years ago, after Bankole delivered Gray's first son, Gray paid Allie to build a fine rocking chair for "the doctor." Gray and Bankole hadn't gotten along very well at first—Gray's fault, and he knew it. He pretended to be contemptuous of Bankole—"a pussy-whipped old man!"—when, in fact, Bankole's age, education, and personal dignity intimidated him. Until Gray's wife had become

pregnant with their first son, the two men barely spoke. Then Bankole took care of Emery during her pregnancy and during Joseph's difficult birth—he was breech. After that, the handsome, oaken chair, given in stolid silence, had served as Gray's peace offering. Now Bankole sits in it rocking, looking into his daughter's sleeping face, touching it as though he can't quite believe it's real, and yet, as though it's more real, more important than anything else in his world.

He seems to have taken his cue from Adela Ortiz. He says Larkin looks just like his younger sister did when she was a baby. That's the sister whose bones we found when we arrived here. Her bones, her husband's, her children's. After their deaths, Bankole must have felt cut off from the future, from any immortality of the flesh, the genes. He had no other relatives. Now he has a daughter. I'm not sure he even realizes how much of the time over the past couple of days that he's been smiling.

SUNDAY, JULY 24, 2033

Today we Welcomed Larkin into the community—into Acorn and into Earthseed.

So far, I've been the one to Welcome each new child or adult adoptee. I don't conduct every Sunday Gathering, but I have Welcomed every newcomer. By now, it's expected—something I'm *supposed* to do. This time, though, I asked Travis to perform the ceremony. And, of course, we asked Harry and Zahra to stand with us. Bankole and I are already Change-sister and -brother to them and Change-aunt and -uncle to their children. Now it goes the other way as well. We each stand ready to parent one another's children. The

Balters are my oldest friends and I trust them, but I hope the pledges we've given one another will never have to be kept.

It makes us more truly a community, somehow, now that so many of us have had children here…now that I've had a child here.

Larkin Beryl Ife Olamina Bankole,
We, your people
Welcome you.…

SATURDAY, JULY 30, 2033

"I don't think you can truly understand how I feel," Bankole said to me last night as he sat down to eat the dinner I had kept warm for him. He had been on evening watch, sitting with binoculars at a mountain overlook where he could see whether some new gang of thugs was approaching to destroy his family. He's more serious than ever about maintaining our 24-hour watch, but for each of us, standing watch is still a tiresome duty. I didn't expect him to come home in a good mood, but he was still on enough of a new-daddy high not to be too bad-tempered.

"You just wait until Larkin starts waking him up more," Zahra has warned me.

No doubt she's right.

Bankole sat down at the table and sighed. "Before I met you," he said, "there were times when I felt as though I were already dead." He looked at me, then at Larkin's crib where she slept, full of milk and, so far, dry. "I think you've saved me," he said. "I wish you'd let me save you."

That again. The people of Halstead had found themselves another doctor, but they didn't like him. There was some doubt as to whether he really was a doctor.

Bankole thought he might have some medical training, but that he was something less than or other than an M.D. He was only about 35, and these days, almost all young physicians—those under 50—were working in privatized or foreign-owned cities, towns, or huge farms. There, they could earn enough to give their families good lives and the company police would keep them safe from marauding thugs or desperate poor people. There had to be something wrong with a 35-year-old doctor who was still looking for a place to hang out his shingle.

Bankole said he thought a sick or injured person would be safer in the hands of Natividad or Michael than with Halstead's new "Doctor" Babcock. He had warned several of his Halstead friends, and they had let him know that he was still welcome. They didn't doubt his medical knowledge, and they preferred to have him. And he still wanted to save me by taking me to live among them.

"Acorn is a community of people who have saved one another in all kinds of ways," I told him. "Acorn is home."

He looked at me again, then set to work on his dinner. It was late, and I had already eaten. I had taken the baby and gone to eat with Zahra and Harry and their kids. But now, I sat with him, sipping hot mint tea with honey and enjoying the peace. The fire in our antique, salvaged woodstove had burned to almost nothing, but the stove's cast-iron body was still warm and the July night wasn't cold. We were using only three small oil lamps for light. No need to waste electricity. The lamplight was soft and flickering.

I stared into the shadows, enjoying the quiet, family togetherness, content and drowsy until Bankole spoke again.

"You know," he said, "it took me a long time to trust you. You seemed so young—so vulnerable and idealistic, yet

so dangerous and knowing."

"What?" I demanded.

"Truth. You were quite a contradiction. You still are. I thought you would grow out of it. Instead, I've gotten used to it—almost."

We do know one another after six years. I can often hear not only what he says but what he does not say. "I love you too," I said, not quite smiling.

Nor did he allow himself to smile. He leaned forward, forearms on the table, and spoke with quiet intensity. "Talk to me, girl. Tell me exactly what you want to do in this place, with these people. Leave out the theology this time, and give me some step-by-step plans, some material results that you hope to achieve."

"But you know," I protested.

"I'm not sure that I do. I'm not sure that *you* do. Tell me."

I understood then that he was looking for reasons to reevaluate his position. He still believed that we should leave Acorn, that we could be safe only in a bigger, richer, longer-established town. "Convince me," he was saying.

I drew a long, ragged breath. "I want what's happening," I said. "I want us to go on growing, becoming stronger, richer, educating ourselves and our children, improving our community. Those are the things that we should be doing for now and for the near future. As we grow, I want to send our best, brightest kids to college and to professional schools so that they can help us and in the long run, help the country, the world, to prepare for the Destiny. At the same time, I want to send out believers who have missionary inclinations—send them in family groups to begin Earthseed Gathering Houses in non-Earthseed communities.

“They’ll teach, they’ll give medical attention, they’ll shape new Earthseed communities within existing cities and towns and they’ll focus the people around them on the Destiny. And I want to establish new Earthseed communities like Acorn—made up of people collected from the highways, from squatter settlements, from anywhere at all. Some people will want to stay where they are and join Earthseed the way they might join the Methodists or the Buddhists. Others will need to join a closer community, a geographical, emotional, intellectual unit.” I stopped and drew a long breath. Somehow I had never dared to say this much about my plans to any one person. I had been working them out in my own mind, writing about them, talking about them in bits and pieces to the group at Gathering, but never assembling it all for them. Maybe that was a mistake. Problem was, we’d been focused for so long on immediate survival, on solving obvious problems, on business, on preparing for the near future. And I’ve worried about scaring people off with too many big plans. Worst of all, I’ve worried about seeming ridiculous. It *is* ridiculous for someone like me to aspire to do the things I aspire to do. I know it. I’ve always known it. It’s never stopped me. “We are a beginning,” I said, thinking as I spoke. “It’s as though Earthseed is only an infant like Larkin—‘one small seed.’ Right now we would be so very easy to stamp out. That terrifies me. That’s why we have to grow and spread—to make ourselves less vulnerable.”

“But if you went to Halstead,” he began, “if you moved there—”

“If I went to Halstead, the seed here might die.” I paused, frowned, then said, “Babe, I’m no more likely to leave Acorn now than I am to leave Larkin.”

That seemed to rock him back a little. I don’t know

why, after all that I've already said. He shook his head, sat staring at me for several seconds. "What about President Jarret?"

"What about him?"

"He's dangerous. His being President is going to make a difference, even to us. I'm sure of it."

"We're nothing to him, so small, so insignificant—"

"Remember Dovetree."

Dovetree was the last thing I wanted to remember. So was that state senate candidate that Marc mentioned. Both were real, and perhaps both meant danger to us, but what could I do about either of them? And how could I let the fear of them stop me? "This country is over 250 years old," I said. "It's had bad leaders before. It survived them. We'll have to watch what Jarret does, change when necessary, adapt, maybe keep a little quieter than we have for a while. But we've always had to adapt to changes. We always will. God is Change. If we have to start saying 'Long live Jarret' and 'God bless Christian America,' then we'll say it. He's temporary."

"So are we. And living with him won't be that easy."

I leaned toward him. "We'll do what we have to do, no matter who's warming the chair in the Oval Office. What choice do we have? Even if we run and hide in Halstead, we'll still be subject to Jarret. And we'll have no good friends around us to help us, lie for us if necessary, take risks for us. In Halstead, we'll be strangers. We'll be easy to pick out and blame and hurt. If vigilante crazies or even cops of some kind come asking questions about us or accusing us of witchcraft or something, Halstead might decide we're more trouble than we're worth. If things get bad, I want my friends around me. Here at Acorn, if we can't save everything, we can at least work together to save

one another. We've done that before."

"This is like nothing we've faced before." Bankole's shoulders slumped, and he sighed. "I don't know that this country has ever had a leader as bad as Jarret or as bad as Jarret might turn out to be: Keep that in mind. Now that you're a mother, you've got to let go of some of the Earthseed thinking and think of your child. I want you to look at Larkin and think of her every time you want to make some grand decision."

"I can't help doing that," I said. "This isn't about grand decisions. It's about her and her future." I drank the last of my tea. "You know," I said, "for a long time, it terrified me —honestly terrified me—to think that the Destiny itself was so big, so complex, so far from the life I was living or anything that I could ever bring about alone, so far from anything that even seemed possible. I remember my father saying that he thought even the pitiful little space program that we've just junked was stupid and wrong and a huge waste of money."

"He was right," Bankole said.

"He *was not right*!" I whispered, my feelings flaring. After a moment, I said, "We need the stars, Bankole. *We need purpose!* We need the image the Destiny gives us of ourselves as a growing, purposeful species. We need to become the adult species that the Destiny can help us become! If we're to be anything other than smooth dinosaurs who evolve, specialize, and die, we need the stars. That's why the Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars. I know you don't want to hear verses right now, but that one is…a major key to us, to human beings, I mean. When we have no difficult, long-term purpose to strive toward, we fight each other. We destroy ourselves. We have these chaotic, apocalyptic periods of murderous

craziness." I stopped for a moment, then let myself say what I had never said to anyone. He had a right to hear it. "Early on, when I told people about the Destiny, and most of them laughed, I was afraid. I worried that I couldn't do this, couldn't reach people and help them see truth. Later, when the people of Acorn began to accept all the Earthseed teachings except the Destiny, I worried more. People seem to be willing to believe all kinds of stupid things—magic, the supernatural, witchcraft….But I couldn't get them to believe in something real, something that they could make real with their own hands. Now…now most of the people here accept the Destiny. They believe me and follow me, and…damned if I don't worry even more."

"You never said so." Bankole reached out and took my hands between his.

"What could I say? That I believe in Earthseed, yet I doubt my own abilities? That I'm afraid all the time?" I sighed. "That's where faith comes in, I guess. It always comes sooner or later into every belief system. In this case, it's have faith and work your ass off. Have faith and work the asses off a hell of a lot of people. I realize all that, but I'm still afraid."

"Do you think anyone expects you to know everything?"

I smiled. "Of course they do. They don't believe I know it all, and they wouldn't like me much if I did, but somehow, they do expect it. Logic isn't involved in feelings like that."

"No, it isn't. I suspect that logic isn't involved in trying to found a new religion and then having doubts about it either."

"My doubts are personal," I said. "You know that. I doubt myself, not Earthseed. I worry that I might not be

able to make Earthseed anything more than another little cult." I shook my head. "It could happen. Earthseed is true —is a collection of truths, but there's no law that says it has to succeed. We can always screw it up. I can always screw it up. There's so much to be done."

Bankole went on holding my hands, and I let myself go on talking, thinking aloud. "I wonder sometimes whether I'll make it. I might grow old and die without seeing Earthseed grow the way that it should, without leaving the Earth myself or seeing others leave, maybe without even focusing serious attention on the Destiny. There are so many little cults—like earthworms twisting and feeding, forming and splitting, and going nowhere."

"I'll die without seeing the results of most of your efforts," Bankole said.

I jumped, looked at him, then said, "What?"

"I think you heard me, girl."

I never know what to say when he starts talking that way. It scares me because, of course, it's true.

"Listen," he said. "Do you really think you can spend your life—your life, girl!—struggling and risking yourself, maybe risking our child for a…a cause whose fulfillment you…probably won't live to see? Should you do such a thing?" I could feel him holding himself back, trying so hard to discourage me without offending me.

He let my hands go, then moved his chair around closer to me. He put his arm around me. "It's a good dream, girl, but that's all it is. You know that as well as I do. You're an intelligent person. You know the difference between reality and fantasy."

I leaned against him. "It's more than a good dream, babe. It's right. It's true! And it's so big and so difficult, so long-term, and as far as money is concerned, it's potentially

so profitless, that it'll take all the strong religious faith we human beings can muster to make it happen. It's not like anything humanity has ever done before. And if I can't have it, if I can't help to make it happen…" To my amazement, I felt myself on the verge of tears. "If I can't give it the push it needs, if I can't live to see it succeed…" I paused, swallowed. "If I can't live to see it succeed, then, maybe Larkin can!" I found the words all but impossible to say. It was not a new idea to me that I might not live to see the Destiny fulfilled. But it felt new. Now Larkin was part of it, and it felt new and real. It felt true. It made me frantic inside, my thoughts leaping around. I felt as though I didn't know what to do. All of a sudden, I wanted to go stand beside Larkin's crib and look at her, hold her. I didn't move. I leaned against Bankole, unsettled, trembling.

After a while, Bankole said, "Welcome to adulthood, girl."

I did cry then. I sat there with tears running down my face. I couldn't stop. I made no noise, but of course, Bankole saw, and he held me. At first I was horrified and disgusted with myself. I don't do that. I don't cry on people. I've never been that kind of person. I tried to pull away from Bankole, but he held me. He's a big man.

I'm tall and strong myself, but he just folded his arms around me so that I couldn't get away from him without hurting him. After a moment, I decided I was where I wanted to be. If I had to cry on someone's shoulders, well, his were big and broad.

After a time, I stopped, all cried out, exhausted, ready to get up and go to bed. I wiped my face on a napkin, and looked at him. "I wonder if that was some kind of postpartum something-or-other?"

"It might have been," he said, smiling.

“It doesn’t matter,” I told him. “I meant everything I said.”

He nodded. “I guess I know that.”

“Then let’s go to bed.”

“Not yet. Listen to me, Olamina.”

I sat still and listened.

“If we stay here, if I agree that you and Larkin and I are going to stay here, this place is not going to be just one more squatter’s shanty.”

“It was never that!”

He held up his hand. “My daughter will not grow up grubbing for a living through the ruins of other people’s homes and trash heaps. This place will be a town—a twenty-first-century town. It will be a decent place to raise a child—a place with some hope of survival and success. Whatever other grand things we do or fail to do, we will do that much!”

“It’s an Acorn,” I said, stroking his face, his beard. “It will grow.”

He almost smiled. Then he was solemn again. “If I accept this, I’m in it for good! If you change your mind after a few hard times…”

“Do I tend to do that, babe? Am I like that?”

He stared hard at me, silent, weighing.

“I helped you build this house,” I said, referring to the literal meaning of his name, *help me build a house.* “I helped you build this house. Now there’s so much more work to do.”

ELEVEN

From EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING

Choose your leaders
with wisdom and forethought.
To be led by a coward
is to be controlled
by all that the coward fears.
To be led by a fool
is to be led
by the opportunists
who control the fool.
To be led by a thief
is to offer up
your most precious treasures
to be stolen.
To be led by a liar
is to ask
to be told lies.
To be led by a tyrant
is to sell yourself
and those you love
into slavery.

I'M NOT CERTAIN HOW to write about the next episode in my parents' lives and in my life. I'm glad to have no memory of it. I was only two months old when it happened.

It's all very strange, very bad, very confused. If only

my mother had agreed to go with my father to live peacefully, normally in Halstead, it wouldn't have happened. Or at least, it wouldn't have happened to us.

FROM *The Journals of Lauren Oya Olamina*
MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 2033

They didn't shoot their way in. It seems that they don't intend to kill us. Yet. Since Dovetree, they have changed. Their leader has come to power. They have acquired…if not legitimacy, at least a shadow of sophistication. Roaring in, shooting everyone, and burning everything is perhaps too crude for them now. Or maybe it's just not as much fun.

I write, not knowing how long I will be able to write. I write because they have not yet robbed us of everything. Our freedom is gone, our two trucks, our land, our business, our homes are gone, stolen from us. But somehow, I still have paper, pens, and pencils. None of our captors values these things, so no one has yet taken them from me. I must keep them hidden or they will be taken. All possessions will be taken. They will strip us. They've made that all too clear. They will break us down, reshape us, teach us what it means to love their country and fear their God.

Our several secret caches of food, weapons, money, clothing, and records have not been found. At least, I don't believe they have been. No one has heard that they have.

We're shut up in two of the rooms of the school. Our books are still here on their shelves. The various projects of our students are still here. Our several phones and our five new teaching computers are gone. They have hard-currency value. Also, they were a means of communicating with the outside. We are not permitted to do that. That would inhibit

our reeducation.

I must make a record of all this. I don't want to, but I must. And I must hide that record so that, someday, Earthseed will know what Earthseed has survived.

We will do that. We will survive. I don't yet know how. How is always a problem. But, in fact, we will survive.

Here is what happened.

Late Tuesday afternoon last week, I was sketching two of the Faircloth kids and talking with them about the project they wanted to work on for school. They had, in their required study of history, just discovered World War II, and they wanted to build models of the battleships, submarines, and airplanes of the time. They wanted to report on the big battles and find out more about the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. They were fascinated by all of the loud, explosive events of the War, but they had no idea what a huge subject they had chosen or, beyond the barest outline, why the War had been fought. I had decided to sketch them while the three of us talked about it and narrowed things down.

The Faircloth family had always been poor, had lived in a squatter settlement before they came to us. Alan Faircloth had small, badly creased, paper photos of the boys as babies, but nothing recent. He had pleased me more than I would have been willing to admit by asking me to draw the two of them. I had become vain about my drawing. It was finally somewhere near good. Even Harry, Zahra, and Allie had said so, and they were the ones who had the most fun with my earlier efforts.

The boys and I were outside behind the school, enjoying a warm, easy day. Larkin lay next to me, asleep in her crib in spite of the noise the boys made. She was

already used to noise. The boys were 11 and 12, small for their age, always loud, and unlikely to be still for more than two or three minutes at a time. First they peeked at Larkin, then they lost interest and shouted first at each other, then at me about weapons and battles, dive-bombers and aircraft carriers, Hitler, Churchill, Tojo, London, Stalingrad, Tokyo, on and on. Interesting that a thing as terrible and as massive as a worldwide war could seem so wonderful and exciting to a pair of preadolescent boys whose grandparents weren't born in time for it—although they did have paternal grandparents who were born and raised in London.

I sketched the boys quickly while listening to their enthusiasm and making suggestions. I was just finishing the sketches when the maggots arrived.

A maggot, nicknamed in its ugly shape, is something less than a tank, and something more than a truck. It's a big, armed and armored, all-terrain, all-wheel-drive vehicle. Private cops and military people use them, and people with plenty of money drive them as private cars. Maggots can go almost anywhere, over, around, or through almost anything. The people of Halstead have one. They've used it now and then to collect Bankole. Several small local towns have one or two for their cops or for search and rescue in the hills. But the things are serious fuel eaters—expensive to run.

That Friday, seven maggots came crawling out of the hills and through our thorn fence toward us. There had been no warning from the watchers. Nothing at all. That was my first thought when I saw them coming: Where were Lucio Figueroa and Noriko Kardos? Why hadn't they warned us? Were they all right?

Seven maggots! That was three or four times as much firepower as we could muster if we brought out every one of our guns. Only our truck guns would have even a ghost

of a chance of stopping a maggot, anyway.

Seven of the damned things!

"Go home!" I said to the two boys. "Tell your father and sisters to get the hell out. No drill. The real thing! Get out, fast and quiet! Run!"

Both boys ran.

I took my phone from my pocket and tapped out the emergency bug-out signal. We've had bug-out exercises. Bankole called them that, and the name spread. I thought of them as "melt into the mountains" exercises. Now we faced the real thing. It had to be real. No one came visiting in seven armed and armored maggots.

I grabbed my Larkin as fast as I could and ran for the hills. I tried to keep the school building between the two of us and the nearest maggots. They were crawling toward us in what could have been a military formation. They could run us down, shoot us, do whatever they chose to do. The only thing we might be able to do that they couldn't do was vanish into the mountains. But could we even do that? If we kept still, the maggots' sensory equipment would spot us. And if we ran, the rocks and trees and thorn bushes wouldn't give us much protection from the maggots' guns. But what could we do but run? As long as no one came out of the maggots, we had nothing to shoot at.

Where was Bankole? I didn't know. Well, we had rendezvous points. We would find each other. The idea was *not* to waste time running around looking for relatives. Except for babies and very young children, everyone knew from the drills that a command to get out meant exactly, that. "*Get out now!*"

And we were to go in all directions. We were not to follow one another or group together and provide our enemies with big, easy targets. As much as possible, we

were to put trees and geographical features between ourselves and the enemy.

But what were we to do when the enemy was everywhere?

Then, in the same instant, all seven of the maggots began firing. It took me a moment to realize that they were not firing bullets, that, perhaps, we were not about to be killed. They were firing gas canisters. I kept running, hoping that others were doing the same. No matter what the gas was, it was not intended to do us good.

I headed through the young oak grove that was our cemetery toward the fold of a hill that I hoped would both shelter me and give me an easier path up over the first hill.

Then just ahead of me, a canister landed. Before it hit the ground, it began to spew out gas.

And my legs wouldn't hold me. I was running. Then I felt myself begin to fall. It was all I could do to manage not to fall on my baby, instead to have her fall on me. I heard her begin to cry—a thin, un-Larkinlike whimpering. I don't believe I cried out. I know I never lost consciousness. It was a terrible gas. I still don't know the name of it. It took away most of my ability to move, but left me wide awake, able to hear and see, able to know that my people were being collected like driftwood, being carried or dragged away by uniformed men.

Someone came to me, bent, and took Larkin from me. I couldn't move my head to see what he did with her. I couldn't struggle or protest or plead. I couldn't even scream.

Someone came for me and took me by the feet and dragged me over the ground, down the hill to the school. I was wearing denims and a light cotton shirt, and I could feel my back scraping over rocks and weeds. I could feel pressure—bumping and thudding. It didn't hurt as it was

happening, but I knew it would hurt. All the adults and older kids had been carried or dragged to the school. I could see several of them sprawled on the floor wherever their captors had dropped them. What I could not see were the babies and young children.

I could not see my Larkin.

At one point, I heard shooting outside. It came from the south side of the school, not far away. It sounded like the guns of our older truck. Perhaps one of us had reached the truck and tried to use it as Bankole, Harry, and I had back when Dan and Nina Noyer came home. That was hopeless. Our old housetruck wouldn't have been a match for even one maggot. Then I heard a huge explosion. After that there was silence.

What had happened? Were the children involved? Not knowing was an agonizing torment. Utter helplessness was even worse. I could breathe. I could twitch a hand or a foot. I could blink. Nothing more.

After a while, I could whimper a little.

Sometime later, a man wearing the uniform of the day —black pants and a belted, black tunic with a white cross on its front, came to do something to us, to each of us. I couldn't see what he was doing until he got to me, unbuttoned three buttons of my shirt, raised my head, and fastened the slave collar around my neck.

It was that simple. They took Acorn. Its name is Camp Christian now. We captives were not able to do more than twitch, blink, or moan for over an hour. That was plenty of time to collar almost all of us.

No one collared Gray Mora. He had been a slave earlier in his life. He had never worn a collar, but he had spent his childhood and young manhood as the property of people

who treated him not quite as well as they treated their cattle. They had taken his wife from him and sold her to a wealthy man who had seen her and wanted her. She was, according to Gray, a short, slight, very pretty woman, and she brought a good price. Her new owner made casual sexual use of her and then somehow, by accident or not, killed her. When Gray heard about that, he took his daughter Doe and broke free. He never told us exactly how he got free. I've always assumed he killed one or more of his masters, stole their possessions, and took off. That's what I would have done.

But this time, there was no escape. And yet Gray would not be a slave again.

I found out later that he managed to get to the housetruck, lock himself in, and fire on some of the maggots. That scratched them more than a little. Then, as the maggots began to fire on him and blow the housetruck's armor to hell, he charged one of them. He rammed it. There was an explosion. There shouldn't have been.

The housetruck was as safe as it could be. Making it explode had to take a conscious effort—unless it was the maggot that exploded. I don't know for sure. But knowing Gray, I suspect he did something to cause the explosion. I believe he chose to die.

He is dead.

I can't believe that any of this is true. Ị mean…there ought to be a different way to write about these things—a way that at least begins to express the insanity and the terrible, terrible pain of it all. Acorn has always been full of ugly stories. There wasn't an adult among us who didn't have one. But we'd come together, lived together, helped one another, survived, thrived, we'd done that! *We'd done all that!* We'd made a good home for ourselves, were making

an honest living. Now people with crosses have come and put slave collars on us.

And where is my baby? Where is Larkin?

They separated the women and older girls from the men and older boys while we were paralyzed. They left the men in the larger room of the school and dragged us women into one of the smaller ones. I didn't think about it at the time, but that was an odd thing to do because there were more women than men in the community. We were dumped onto the wooden floor, half atop one another, and left there. The windows were open, and I remember thinking it strange that no one bothered to board them up or even close them.

The only good thing was that as I was half lifted and half dragged, I saw Bankole. I don't believe he saw me. He was lying on his back, staring straight up, one scraped, bloody hand on his chest. I saw him blink. I did see that, so I knew he was alive. If only he had gotten away. He would have been more likely than anyone else to find some way to help the rest of us. Besides, what will our captors do to a man his age? Would they care that he was old? No. From the way he looked, it was clear that he had been dragged across the ground just as I was. They didn't care.

Would they care that my Larkin was only a baby? And where was she? *Where was she?*

I was terrified every time someone came near me. All our captors were young men, and I'd seen two or three angry, bloody ones. I didn't know at the time that this was Gray's work. I didn't know anything. All I could think about was Larkin, Bankole, my people, and the damned slave collar around my neck.

As the sun went down, my body began to hurt—my back and my hands and arms burned where they had scraped along the ground as I was dragged. My head felt lumpy and sore. It also ached in a hard, throbbing way that might have had something to do with the gas.

It was dark when I began trying to move. For a long time, all I could do was flop around a little. Someone in the room groaned. Someone else began to cry. Someone gasped, choked, and began to cough. Someone said over and over again, "Ah shit!" and I recognized Allie Gilchrist's voice.

"Allie?" I said. I slurred the word, sounded drunk to my own ears, but she heard me.

"Olamina?"

"Yeah."

"Look, did you see Justin before they dragged you in here?"

"No. Sorry. Did you see Larkin?"

"No. Sorry."

"They took my baby too," Adela Ortiz said in a hoarse whisper. "They took him and I don't know where he is." She began to cry.

I wanted to cry myself. I wanted to just to lie there and cry because I hurt so much in so many ways. I felt too weak and uncoordinated to do anything but cry. Instead, I sat up, bumped someone, apologized, sat stupidly for a while, then found the sense to say, "Who else is here? One by one, say your names."

"Noriko," a voice said just to my left. "They took Deborah and Melissa," she continued. "I had Melissa and Michael had Deborah. We were running. I thought we were going to make it. Then that damned gas. We fell down, and someone came and pulled both girls away from us. I couldn't see anything but hands and arms taking them."

“And my babies,” Emery Mora said. “My babies….” She was crying, almost incoherent, “My little boys. My sons. They took my sons again. *Again*!” She had had two young sons when she was a slave years ago, and they had been sold away from her. She had been a debt slave—a legally indentured person bound for her family’s unpaid debts. The debts were accumulated because she worked for an agribusiness corporation that underpaid its workers in company scrip instead of money, then overcharged them for food and shelter so that they could stay in ever-increasing debt. It was against the law for the company to break up families by selling minor children away from their parents or husbands from their wives. It was against both local and federal law, so it shouldn’t have happened. Just as what’s happened to us now shouldn’t have happened.

I thought about Emery’s older daughter and stepdaughter. “What about Tori and Doe?” I said. “Are they here? Tori? Doe?”

At first, there was no answer, and I thought of Nina and Paula Noyer. I didn’t want to think of them, but Doe and Tori Mora were 14 and 15—far from babyhood. If they weren’t here, where were they?

Then a very small voice said, “I’m here. Get off me.”

“I’m trying to get off you,” a stronger voice said. “There’s no room in here. I can hardly move.”

Tori and Doe, alive, and as well as the rest of us were. I shut my eyes and took a long, deep, grateful breath. “Nina Noyer?” I asked.

She began to answer, then coughed several times. “I’m here,” she said at last, “but my little sisters…I don’t know what happened to them.”

“Mercy?” I called. “Kassi?”

No answer.

“May?”

No answer. She couldn’t talk, but she would have made a noise to let us know she was there.

“She had Kassia and Mercy with her,” Allie said. “She’s strong and fast. Maybe she got them away. She loved them like she gave birth to them.”

I sighed. “Aubrey Dovetree?” I asked.

“I’m here,” she said. “But I can’t find Zoë or the kids.… Zoë had all three of them with her.”

And Zoë had a heart condition, I thought. She might be dead, even if no one meant to kill her. Not knowing what else to do, I went on with my role call. “Marta Figueroa?”

“Yes,” she whispered. “Yes, I’m here, all alone. My brother….My children….Gone.”

“Diamond Scott? Cristina Cho?”

“I’m here,” said two voices at once, one in English and the other in Spanish. Cristina’s English was good now, but under stress, she still reverted to Spanish.

“Beatrice Scolari? Catherine Scolari?”

“We’re here,” Catherine Scolari’s voice said. She sounded as though she had been crying. “Vincent is dead.” she said. “He fell against a rock, hit his head. I heard them say he was dead.” Vincent was her husband and Beatrice’s brother. He had only one arm because of an accident that happened before he joined us. He was, perhaps, more likely than most of us to be off balance when the gas collapsed him. But still…

“He might not be dead,” I said.

“He is. We saw him….” There were more sounds of crying. I didn’t know what to say to them. All I could think was that maybe Larkin was dead too. And what about Bankole? I didn’t want to think about death. I didn’t really want to think at all.

“Channa Ryan?” I said.

“I’m here. Oh god, I wish I wasn’t.”

“Beth Faircloth? Jessica Faircloth?”

There was no sound at first, then in nearly inaudible whispers, “We’re here. Both of us are here.”

“Natividad?” I said. “Zahra?”

“I’m here,” Natividad said in Spanish. Then, “If they’ve hurt my babies, I’ll cut their throats. I’ll kill all of them. I don’t care what they do to me.” She began to cry. She’s strong, but her kids mean more than life to her. She had a husband and three kids. Now, they’re all gone from her.

“All of our babies are gone,” I said. “We have to find out where they’re being kept and who’s guarding them and…and what’s going to happen to them.” I shifted, trying to get more comfortable, but that was impossible. “My Larkin should be nursing now. Right now. We have to find out what we can.”

“They’ve put slave collars on us,” Marta Figueroa said in almost a moan. “They took our kids and our men, and they put slave collars on us! What the hell more do we need to know than that?”

“We have to know as much as we can,” I answered. “They’re not killing us. They could have wiped us out. They separated us from the men and from the young kids, but we’re alive. We have to find a way to get our kids back. Whatever we can do to get our kids back, we have to do it!” I felt myself falling toward hysteria, toward weeping and screaming. I tensed my body. Milk was leaking from my breasts onto my shirt, soaking the front of it, and I ached so.

For a long time no one said anything. Then Teresa Lin, who had not spoken before, whispered, “That window is open. I can see the stars.”

“Did they put a collar on you?” I heard myself ask. I

sounded almost normal to my own ears. My voice was soft and low.

"What, this wide flat thing? They put one on me. I don't care. That window is open! I'm getting out of here!" And she began scrambling over people toward the window. Someone cried out in pain. Several voices cursed her.

"Everybody down," I said. "Down on your face!"

I could not see who obeyed me. I hoped all the sharers did. I wasn't sure what the collar would do to Teresa when she tried to get out the window. Maybe it was a fake. Maybe it wouldn't do anything. Maybe it would cut off her breath. Maybe it would collapse her, and cause her terrible pain.

She dived out of the window. She's a slim woman, quick and lithe like a boy. I looked up in time to see her arc out the window as though she expected to land on something soft or on water.

Then she began to scream and scream and scream. Allie Gilchrist got up, stepped to the window, and looked out at her. Then Allie tried to climb out to help her. The moment Allie touched the window, she screamed, then fell back into our prison room. Allie curled on her side against me, and grunted several times—hard, agonized grunts. I turned my face away, her pain twisting in my own middle. It helped that I hadn't been able to see Teresa once she fell below the level of the window, but I had already gotten a taste of her pain too.

Outside, Teresa went on screaming and screaming.

"No one's around," Allie said, still gasping. "She's just lying there on the ground, screaming and twisting. No one's even come out to see."

She lay there all night. We couldn't help her. Her voice deteriorated from full-throated screaming, the way any of us

might scream in fear and pain, to hoarse terrible grunting. She didn't pass out—or rather, she did, but she kept coming to again and making her terrible noises.

Going near the door meant pain. Going to the window meant pain. Even if you didn't try to get out, just being there hurt, hurt bad. Diamond Scott volunteered to crawl around the floor, letting her own collar tell her what was forbidden. People complained when she crawled over them, but I asked them to put up with it and Di apologized and the complaints stopped. We were still human, still civilized. I wondered how long that would last.

"Someone's here!" Di said. She almost screamed the words. "Someone's dead here!"

Oh, no. Oh, no.

"Who is it?" I asked.

"I don't know. She's cool. Not cold yet, but…I'm sure she's dead!"

I followed Di's voice, and spotted her silhouette, a darker shape in the darkness. She was moving more than the others, scrambling away from the body that she was sure must be dead.

Who was it?

Then, as I crawled toward the body, trying to be careful, trying not to hurt anyone, I had a feeling, a memory. I was afraid I knew who it was.

The body was sitting upright in a corner, against the wall. It was small—child-sized. It was a black woman's body —a black woman's hair, nose, mouth, but so small….

"Zahra?"

She had not answered when I called her before. She was a bold, outspoken little woman, and she would not have kept quiet in all this. She might have been the one to go out the window before poor Teresa…if she could have.

She was dead. Her body wasn't yet stiff, but it would be soon. It was cooling. It wasn't breathing. I took the small hands between mine and felt the ring that Harry had worked so hard to buy for her. He's old-fashioned, Harry is, even though he's my age. He wanted his wife to wear his ring so that no one would make a mistake. Back when Zahra was the most beautiful woman in our Robledo neighborhood, she was beyond his reach, married to another man. But when that man was dead and Harry saw his chance, he moved right in. They were so different—black and white, tiny and tall, street-raised and middle class. She was three or four years older than he was. None of it mattered. They had managed, somehow, to have a good marriage.

And now she was dead.

And where were her children? I had another sudden, horrible thought. I felt for wounds on her, found scratches and dried blood, but no penetrating wound, no terrible soft place on her head. She had been brought in with the rest of us. Chances were, she was alive when she was brought in. Wouldn't our captors have noticed if she were dead? We were all dumped into this room and locked in by way of our collars during the same few minutes.

After that, no one had come in.

Perhaps, then, it was the gas that had been used on us. Could she have died of that? She was the smallest adult in the community, smaller, even, than Nina, Doe, and Tori. Was it possible that she got too much of the gas for her small size, and that killed her?

And if so, what did that say about our children?

Somehow, time passed. I sat rigid beside the body of my friend, and couldn't think or speak. I cried. I cried in grief and terror and rage. People told me later that I made

no sound at all, but within myself, I cried. Within myself, I screamed with Teresa, and I cried and cried and cried.

After a time, I lay down on the floor, still crying, yet still making no noise. I could hear people around me moaning, crying, cursing, talking, but their words made no sense to me. They might as well have been in a foreign language. I couldn't think of anything except that I wanted to die. Everything that I had worked to build was gone, stolen or dead, and I wanted to be dead too. My baby was dead. She must be. If I could have killed myself, just then I would have. I would have been glad to do it. I awoke, and there was sunlight streaming through the window. I had slept. How could I have slept?

I awoke with my head on someone's lap. Natividad's lap. She had come to sit against the wall next to Zahra's body. She had lifted my head off the floor and put it on her lap. I sat up, blinking and looking around. Natividad herself was asleep, although my moving woke her. She looked at me, then at Zahra's body, then back at me, as though the world were just coming back into focus for her, and it distressed her more and more every second. Her eyes filled with tears. I hugged her for a long time, then kissed her on the cheek.

The room was filled with sleeping women and girls. I counted 19 of us including myself and…not including Zahra and Teresa. Everyone looked dirty and scratched and abraded, and they lay in every possible position, some sprawled alone on the floor, some in pairs or larger groups, heads pillowed on laps, shoulders, or legs.

My breasts ached and leaked and I felt sick. I needed to use the bathroom. I wanted my child, my husband, my home. Near me, Zahra was cold and stiff, her eyes closed, her face beautiful and peaceful, except for its gray color.

I got up, stepped over people as they began to wake up. I went to an empty corner that I knew needed repair. A small earthquake a few months ago had caused a slight separation between the wall and floor in that corner. It wasn't obvious, but ants came in there, and water spilled near there ran out. Gray had promised to fix it, but hadn't gotten around to it.

I moved people away from the area—told them what I was doing and why. They nodded and gave no trouble. I wasn't the only one with a full bladder. I squatted there and urinated. When I finished, others followed my example.

"Is Teresa still there?" I asked Diamond Scott, who was nearest to the window.

Di nodded. "She's unconscious—or maybe dead." Her own voice sounded dead.

"I'm so hungry," Doe Mora said.

"Forget hungry," Tori said. "If I could just have some water."

"Hush," I said to them. "Don't talk about it. It just makes you feel worse. Has anyone seen our captors this morning?"

"They're building a fence," Diamond Scott said. "You can stand back from the window and see them. In spite of the collars they've put on us, they're building a fence."

I looked and saw maggots being used to string wire behind several of our homes, up the slope. As I watched, they smashed through our cemetery, breaking down some of the young trees that we planted to honor our dead. The maggots were well named. They were like huge insect larvae, weaving some vast, suffocating cocoon.

Our captors were keeping our land, then. Until that moment, this had not occurred to me. They were not just out to steal or burn, enslave or kill. That was what thugs

had always done before. That was what they did in my old neighborhood in Robledo, in Bankole's San Diego neighborhood, and elsewhere. A lot of elsewheres. But these were staying, building a fence. Why?

"Listen," I said.

Most of the room paid no attention to me. People had focused on their own misery or on the maggots.

"Listen!" I said, putting as much urgency as I could into my voice. "There are things we need to talk about."

Most of them turned to look at me. Nina Noyer and Emery Mora still stared out the window.

"Listen," I said once more, wanting to shout, but not daring to. "Sooner or later, our captors will come in here. When they do, we need to be ready for them—as ready as we can be." I stopped, drew a deep breath, and saw that now they were all looking at me, all paying attention.

"We need to pretend to go along with them as much as we can," I continued. "We need to obey them and watch them, learn what they are and what they want, and where they're weak!"

People looked at me either as though they thought I'd lost my mind or as though it was good and hopeful news that our captors might, perhaps, have weaknesses.

"Anything they tell us may be lies," I said. "Probably will be. So any of us who get the chance should spy and eavesdrop and share information with the rest. We can escape from them or kill them if we can learn about them and pool our knowledge. Learn about the collars, too. Any little thing might help. And most important, most essential, learn about the kids."

"They'll rape us," Adela said, all but whimpering. "You know they will." *She* knew they would—she who had already suffered so much rape. She and Nina and Allie and

Emery. The rest of us had been lucky—so far. Now our luck has run out. Somehow, we'll have to cope with that.

"I don't know," I said. "They could already have raped us, and they haven't. But…I suspect you're right. When men have absolute power over women who are strangers, the men rape. And we're collared." I glanced toward the window that Teresa's panic had driven her through. "If someone decides to rape one of us, we won't be able to stop him." I paused again. "I think…if you can't talk a guy out of it or beg and cry and get his pity or bluff him into believing you have a disease, then you'll have to put up with it." I paused, feeling inadequate and stupid. I shouldn't be giving these women this kind of advice. I, who had never been raped, had no right to tell them anything. I told them anyway. "*Do put up with it!*" I said. "Don't throw your lives away. Don't end up like Teresa. Learn everything you can from these people, and bring what you learn back to the rest of us. Even the stupid, ugly things that they say and do might be important. Their lying promises might hide a truth. If we collect what we see and hear, if we stay united, work together, support one another, then the time will come when we can win our freedom or kill them or both!"

There was a long silence. They just stared at me. Then someone—Nina Noyer—began to cry. "I was supposed to be free," she said through her tears. "All this was supposed to be over. My brother died to bring me here."

And all of a sudden, I felt *such* shame. All I wanted to do was lie down on the floor in a tight knot around my uselessness and my aching breasts and scream and scream. And I couldn't. I couldn't let myself fail my people in one more miserable way.

And these were my people—*my people.* They had trusted me, and now they were captives. And I could do

nothing—nothing but give them galling advice and try to give them hope. “God is Change,” I heard myself saying. “Our captors are on top now, but if we do this right, we will beat them. It’s that or just…die.”

“I haven’t been able to take my medicine,” Beatrice Scolari said into the near silence. “Maybe I will die.” She had, in the past year, developed high blood pressure, and Bankole had put her on medication. Nina was still crying, now gathered against Allie, who rocked her a little as though she were much younger. Allie herself was crying, but in complete silence. Beatrice Scolari stared at me as though I could produce her medicine.

“Your medicine is one of the first things we’ve got to ask for when they start talking to us,” I told Beatrice. “The very first thing we need is help for Teresa—if it isn’t too late.” But they must have seen Teresa. They must have heard her screaming earlier. Maybe they just didn’t care. They knew she couldn’t get away. Maybe they wanted to use her to make sure we understood our position. “We ask about our kids and about your medicine, Beatrice.” I continued. “Then….Then maybe they’ll let us…take care of Zahra.”

We waited until afternoon, hungry, thirsty, scared, miserable, worried about our children, and wondering about our men. No one paid any attention to us. We saw the invaders going in and out of our homes, finishing their fence, eating our food, but we saw them only from a distance. Even Teresa, lying on the ground outside our window, was ignored.

The younger girls cried and quarreled and complained. The rest of us sat silent most of the time. We had all been through one kind of hell or another. We had all survived

enough to know that crying, complaining, and quarreling did no good. We might forget that in time, but not yet.

Sometime around two or three o'clock, the door of our prison opened. A huge, bearded man filled the doorway, and we stared up at him. He wore the usual uniform—black tunic with white cross and black pants, and he was at least two meters tall. He stared down at us as though we smelled —which we did—and as though that were our fault.

"You and you," he said, pointing to me and to Allie. "Get out here and pick up this corpse."

By reflex, Allie got a stubborn look on her face, but we both stood up. "She's dead, too," I said, pointing to Zahra.

I never saw his hand move, but he must have done something. I screamed, convulsed, dropped to the floor from a jolt of agony that seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere. I was on fire. Then I wasn't. Searing agony. Then nothing.

The man waited until I was able to look up at him, until I did look up.

"You don't speak unless you're spoken to," he said. "You do what you're told when you're told to do it, and you keep your mouths shut!"

I didn't say anything. Somehow, I managed to nod. It occurred to me that I should do that.

Allie stepped toward me to help me up, her hands already out to help me. Then she doubled up in agony of her own. Echoes of her pain burned through me, and I froze, teeth clenched. I was desperate not to announce my extra vulnerability, my sharing. If I was held captive long enough, they would find out. I knew that. But not now. Not yet.

The man didn't seem to take any special notice of me. He watched us both and waited in seeming patience until Allie looked up, bewildered and angry.

“You do what you’re told and only what you’re told,” he said. “You don’t touch one another. Whatever filth you’re used to, it’s over. It’s time for you to learn to behave like decent Christian women—if you’ve got the brains to learn.”

So that was it, then. We were a dirty cult of free lovers, and they had come to straighten us out. Educate us.

I believe Allie and I were chosen because we were the biggest of the women. We were ordered to carry first Zahra, then Teresa, out to a patch of ground where we grew jojoba plants for their oil. There, we were given picks and shovels and ordered to dig graves—long, deep holes—among the jojobas. We had had no food and no water. All we got was a jolt of agony now and then when we slowed down more than our overseer was willing to permit. The ground was bad—rocky and hard. That was why we used it for jojoba plants. The plants are tough. They don’t need much. Now, it seemed that we were the ones who didn’t need much. I didn’t think I could do it—dig the damned hole. It’s been a long time since I’ve felt so bad in every possible way, so horrible, so scared. After a while, all I could think of was water, pain, and where was my baby? I lost track of everything else.

I was digging Zahra’s grave, and I couldn’t even think of that. I just wanted the digging to be over. She was my best friend, my Change-sister, and she lay uncovered, waiting beside the hole as I dug, and it didn’t matter. I couldn’t focus on it.

The other women were brought out of the school and made to watch us dig. I knew that because my attention was caught by the sudden movement of silent, approaching people. I looked up, saw the women shepherded toward us by three black-tunic-and-cross-wearing men. Sometime later, I realized that the men had also been marched out.

They were kept separate, and it seemed that some of them were digging too.

I froze, staring at them, looking for Bankole…and for Harry.

The sudden pain tore a grunt from me. I fell to my knees in the hole I was digging.

"Work!" my slave driver said. "It's time you heathens learned to do a little work."

I had not seen whom the men were burying. I saw Travis, shirt off, swinging a pick into the hard ground. I saw Lucio Figueroa digging another hole and Ted Faircloth digging a third. So they had three dead to our two. Who were their dead? Which of our men had these bastards killed?

Where was Bankole?

I hadn't spotted him. I had had such a quick look. I managed to look again and again as I shoveled dirt out of the hole. In the cluster of men, I spotted Michael, then Jorge, then Jeff King. Then the pain hit again. I didn't fall this time. I held on to the shovel and leaned back against the side of the hole I was digging.

"Dig!" the son of a bitch above me said. "Just dig!"

What would he do if I passed out? Would he go on triggering the collar until I died like Teresa? Was he enjoying himself? He didn't smile as he hurt me. But he did keep hurting me, even though I had shown no signs of rebellion.

Submission was no protection. If any of us were to survive, we must escape these people as quickly as possible.

The big, bearded slaver and perhaps three dozen of his kind stood around us as we stood around the graves. We were made to parade past each grave and look down at the dead.

That was how Harry learned that Zahra was dead and how Lucio Figueroa, who had only this year begun to take an interest in Teresa Lin, came to know of her death. That was how I learned that Vincent Scolari was dead, as his wife and sister believed. And Gray Mora was dead—bloody and broken and dead. And that was how I learned that my Bankole was dead.

There was chaos. Emery Mora and both her daughters began to scream when they saw Gray's mangled body. Natividad and Travis ran into each other's arms. Lucio Figueroa dropped to his knees beside Teresa's grave, and his sister Marta tried to comfort him. Both Scolari women tried to go down into the grave to touch Vincent, to kiss him, to say good-bye. We were all lashed electronically for talking, screaming, crying, cursing, and demanding answers.

And I was lashed into unconsciousness for trying to kill my bearded keeper with a pickax. It would have been worth any amount of pain if only I could have succeeded.

TWELVE

From EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING

Beware:
Ignorance
Protects itself.
Ignorance
Promotes suspicion.
Suspicion
Engenders fear.
Fear quails,
Irrational and blind,
Or fear looms,
Defiant and closed.
Blind, closed,
Suspicious, afraid,
Ignorance
Protects itself,
And protected,
Ignorance grows.

I MISS ACORN. OF course, I have no memory of being there, but it was where my parents were together and happy during their brief marriage. It was where I was conceived, born, and loved by them both. It could have been, should have been, where I grew up—since it was where my mother had insisted on staying. And even if, in spite of my father's intentions and my mother's dreams, the place had gone on looking more like a

nineteenth-century farming village than a stepping-stone toward the Destiny, I wouldn't have minded. It couldn't have been as grim as where I did grow up.

From the coming of Jarret's Crusaders—that is what they called themselves—my life veers away from Acorn and from my mother. The only surprising thing is that we ever met again.

My mother was right about the gas. It was intended to be used to stop riots, to subdue masses of violent people. Unlike poison gases that kill or maim or gases that caused tears and choking, or nausea, this gas was supposed to be merciful. It was called merciful. It was a paralysis gas. Most of the time, it worked fast and caused no pain and had no nasty aftereffects. But occasionally, children and small adults died of it. For that reason, an antidote was developed to be administered to small people who were overcome: It was given to me, to the rest of the little children of Acorn. For some reason it wasn't given to Zahra Balter. She was obviously an adult, in spite of her small size. Maybe the Crusaders thought age was more important than size. There were no physicians among them. There were no health workers of any kind. These were God's people come to bring the true faith to the cultist heathens. I suppose if some of the heathens died of it, that wasn't really very important.

FROM *The Journals of Lauren Oya Olamina*
THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 24, 2033

Thanksgiving Day.

Should I be thankful still to be alive? I'm not sure.

Today is like Sunday—better than Sunday. We have been given extra food and extra rest, and once services were over this morning, we were let alone. I am thankful for that. For once, they aren't watching us. They don't want to spend their holiday guarding us or "teaching" us, as they put it. This means that today I can write. On most days, by the time they let us alone, it's too dark to write and we're exhausted. After our work outside, we're watched and made to memorize and recite sections of the Bible until we can't think or keep our eyes open. I'm thankful to be writing and I'm thankful not to hear my own voice chanting something like, "Unto woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee."

We're not permitted to speak to one another in our "teachers' " presence, and yet not allowed to be quiet and rest.

Now I must find a way to write about the past few weeks, to tell what has happened to us—just to tell it as though it were sane and rational. I'll do that, if for no other reason than to give some order to my scattered thoughts. I do need to write about…about Bankole.

All of our young children are gone. All of them. From Larkin, the youngest, to the Faircloth boys, the oldest, they've vanished.

Now we are told that our children have been saved from our wickedness. They've been given "good Christian homes." We won't see them again unless we leave our "heathenism" behind and prove that we've become people who can be trusted near Christian children. Out of kindness and love, our captors—we are required to address them each as "Teacher"—have provided for our children. They

have put our children's feet on the pathway to good, useful American citizenship here on Earth, and to a place in heaven when they die. Now we, the adults and older kids, must be taught to walk that same path. We must be reeducated. We must accept Jesus Christ as our Savior, Jarret's Crusaders as our teachers, Jarret as God's chosen restorer of America's greatness, and the Church of Christian America as our church. Only then will we be Christian patriots worthy to raise children.

We do not struggle against this. Our captors order us to kneel, to pray, to sing, to testify, and we do. I've made it clear to the others through my own behavior that we should obey. Why should anyone resist and risk torture or death? What would be the good of that? We'll lie to these murderers, these kidnappers, these thieves, these slavers. We'll tell them anything they want to hear, do all that they require us to do. Someday they'll get careless or their equipment will malfunction or we'll find or create some weakness, some blind spot. Then we'll kill them.

But even though we obey, the Crusaders must have their amusements. In their loving kindness, they use the collars to torment us. "This is nothing compared to the fires of hell," they tell us. "Learn your lessons or you'll suffer like this for all eternity!" How can they do what they do if they believe what they say?

They eat our food and feed us their leavings, either as bowls of obvious table scraps or boiled up in a watery soup with turnips or potatoes from our gardens. They live in our houses and sleep in our beds while we sleep on the floor of the school, men in one room, women in another, no communication between the two permitted.

None of us is decently married, it seems. We were not married by a minister of the Church of Christian America.

Therefore, we have been living in sin—"fornicating like dogs!" I heard one Crusader say. That same Crusader dragged Diamond Scott off to his cabin last week and raped her. She says he told her it was all right. He was a man of God, and she should be honored. Afterward, she kept crying and throwing up. She says she'll kill herself if she's pregnant.

Only one of us has done that so far—committed suicide. Only one: Emery Mora. She took revenge for what happened to her husband and for the abduction of her two little boys. She seduced one of the Crusaders—one of those who had moved into her own cabin. She convinced him that she was willing and eager to sleep with him. Then sometime during the night, she cut his throat with a knife she had always kept under her mattress. Then she went to the Crusader sleeping in her daughters' room and cut his throat. After that, she lay down in her bed beside her first victim and cut her own wrists. The three of them were found dead the next morning. Like Gray, Emery had taken substantial revenge.

For her own sake and the sake of her daughters, I wish she had chosen to live. I knew she was depressed, and I tried to encourage her to endure. At night when we were locked up together, we all talked, exchanged news, and tried to encourage one another. But the truth is, if Emery had to die, she chose the best possible way to do it. She's let us know that we can kill our captors. Our collars would not stop us. If Emery had not been confined by her collar to that one cabin, she might have killed even more of them.

But *why* had her collar not stopped her from killing? According to what Marc told me about his captivity, collars protected holders of control units. Was this a matter of a different kind of collar? Perhaps. We couldn't know that. None of the information we had collected and shared in the

night had to do with different kinds of collars. What we had learned was that all our collars were linked together somehow in a kind of collar network. All could be controlled by the units that our captors wore as belts, but the belts themselves were powered or coordinated or somehow controlled from a larger master unit that Diamond Scott believed was kept in one of the two maggots that are always here. Things Di's rapist had said while she was with him waiting to be raped again made her certain that this was true.

A master control unit protected by the guns, locks, and armor of a maggot was beyond our reach, for now. We had to learn more about it. It occurred to me, though, that the reason the belt unit of Emery's rapist had not saved its owner's life was simple: he had taken it off. What man wore his belt to bed? Both of the men Emery had killed had taken their belts off. Why not? Emery was a slender little woman. A man of ordinary size wouldn't doubt his ability to control her with or without the collar.

Once she had killed, Emery would have tried to use the belt units to free herself, either to escape, to try to free us, or to take further revenge. She would have tried. I'm sure of that. And she would have failed either because she had the wrong fingerprints or because she lacked some other necessary key. It was important to know that, but there was more: she had tried the units, no doubt caused herself pain, but she had failed to set off any alarms. Perhaps there were no alarms. That could be very important someday.

We were all lashed for what Emery did. The men were made to watch.

We were marched out of the school and lashed as we were made to kneel and pray, to scream out our sins, to beg

for forgiveness, and quote Bible verses on command. I kept thinking they would make a mistake and kill some of us. This was an orgy of abuse and humiliation. It went on and on for hours with our “teachers” taking turns, trading off, screaming their hate at us, and calling it love. I had no voice at all left by the time it was over. I was sore all over. An actual beating couldn’t have left me feeling any worse. And if anyone had been paying attention to me in particular, they would have seen that I was a sharer. I lost control. I couldn’t have concealed anything.

I remember wishing I could die. I remember wondering if in the end they would force us all to go the way Emery did, each of us taking a few of them with us.

New people have been brought to live among us—men and women from squatter camps and from nearby towns. Most of them seem to be just plain poor people. Some were like the Dovetrees. They produced and sold drugs or homemade beer, wine, or whiskey. And our neighbors the Sullivan and the Gama families have been rounded up and brought here. Some of their children used to attend our school, but none were captured with us. I haven’t seen any of them since our capture. Why have they been taken captive and brought here now? No one seems to know.

The new women were stuffed in with us or put into the empty third room of the school—the room that was once our clinic. The men were housed in the big room with our men.

I need to write about Bankole.

I meant to do that when I began. I need to but I don’t want to. It just plain hurts too much.

The Crusaders are making us enlarge our prison and enlarge our cabins, which are now their homes. And we work in the fields as before. We're feeding livestock and cleaning their pens. We're turning compost, we're planting herbs, we're harvesting winter fruits, vegetables and herbs, clearing brush from the hills. We're expected to feed ourselves and our captors. They eat better than we do, of course. After all, we owe them more than we can ever pay, you see, because they're teaching us to forsake our sinful ways. They keep talking about teaching us the meaning of hard work. They tell us that we're no longer squatters, parasites, and thieves. I've earned myself more than one lashing by saying that my husband and I own this land, that we've always paid our taxes on it, and that we've never stolen from anyone.

They've burned our books and our papers.

They've burned all that they could find of our past. It's all ungodly trash, they say. They made us do most of the fetching and carrying, the stacking and piling of so much that we loved. They watched us, their hands on their belts. All the books on paper and on disk. All the collections that our younger kids had assembled of minerals, seeds, leaves, pictures…All the reports, models, sculptures and paintings that our older kids have done. All the music that Travis and Gray wrote. All the plays that Emery wrote. All the bits of my journal that they could find. All the legal papers, including marriage licenses, tax receipts, and Bankole's deed to the land. All these things, our teachers threw lamp oil on and burned, then raked and stirred and burned again.

In fact, they've only burned copies of the legal papers. I'm not sure that matters, but it's true. Since we got our first truck, we've kept the originals in a safe-deposit box in Eureka—Bankole's idea. And we keep other copies in our

various caches, along with a few books, other records, and the usual weapons, food, money, and clothing. I had been scanning Bankole's writing and my journal notebooks and hiding disk copies of them in the caches too. I don't know why I did this. In the case of my journals, it's an indulgence that I've always been a little ashamed of—wasting money copying my own stuff. But I remember I felt much better when I began to do it. Now I only wish I had scanned Emery's plays and Travis's and Gray's music. At least, as far as I know, the caches are still safe.

I've hidden my writing paper, pens, and pencils away in our prison room. Allie and Natividad have helped me loosen a couple of floorboards near the window. With only sharp stones and a couple of old nails as tools, we made a small compartment by scraping a hollow in one of the big lumber girders that supports the floor joists. The joists themselves were too slender and too obvious if anyone noticed a loose board. We hoped no "teacher" would peer down into the darkness to see whether anything might be in the girder. Natividad put her wedding ring there too, and Allie put in some drawings that Justin had done. Noriko put in a smooth, oval green stone. She and Michael had found it back when they had gone out salvaging together—back when they could be together.

Interesting that we could scrape into the girder without pain from our collars. Allie thought it meant we might be able to escape by loosening more floorboards and crawling out under the school. But when we got Tori Mora, the slenderest of us, to try to go down, she began to writhe in pain the moment her feet reached the ground. She convulsed and we had to pull her out.

So we know one more thing. It's a negative thing, but we needed to know it.

So much is gone. So much has been taken from us and destroyed. If we haven't found a way out, at least we've found a way to keep a few small things. I find myself thinking sometimes that I could bear all this better if I still had Larkin and Bankole, or if I could see Larkin and know that she was alive and all right. If I could only just see her….

I don't know whether the actions of these so-called Crusaders have any semblance of legality. It's hard to believe they might—stealing the land and freedom of people who've followed the law, earned their own livings, and given no trouble. I can't believe that even Jarret has so mangled the constitution as to make such things legal. At least, not yet. So how could a vigilante group have the nerve to set up a "reeducation" camp and run it with illegally collared people? We've been here for over a month and no one has noticed. Even our friends and customers don't seem to have noticed. The Gamas and the Sullivans aren't rich or powerful, but they've been in these hills for a couple of generations. Hasn't anyone come asking questions about them?

Maybe they have. And who has answered the questions? Crusaders in their other identities as ordinary, law-abiding patriots? I don't think it's too much to assume they have such identities. What lies have they told? Any group wealthy enough to have seven maggots, to support at least several dozen men, and to have what seems to be an endless number of expensive collars must be able to spread any lies it chooses to spread. Perhaps our friends outside have been told believable lies. Or perhaps they've just been frightened into silence, given to know that they shouldn't ask too many questions lest they get into trouble

themselves. Or maybe it's just that none of us has powerful enough friends. We were nobodies, and our anonymity, far from protecting us, had made us vulnerable.

We at Acorn were told that we were attacked and enslaved because we were a heathen cult. But the Gamas and the Sullivans aren't cultists. I've asked women from both families why they were attacked, but they don't know either.

The Gamas and the Sullivans owned their land just as we did, and unlike the Dovetrees, the Gamas and the Sullivans had never raised marijuana or sold alcoholic beverages. They worked their land and they took jobs in the towns whenever they could find them. They worked hard and behaved themselves. And in the end, what did it matter? All their hard work and ours, all Bankole's attention to dead-and-gone laws, and all my hopes for my Larkin and for Earthseed….I don't know what's going to happen. We will get out of this! We'll do that somehow! But what then? From what I've been able to hear, some of our "teachers" come from important families in the Churches of Christian America in Eureka, Arcata, and the surrounding smaller towns. This land is mine now. Bankole, with his trust in law and order, made a will, I've read it. The copy we kept here has been destroyed, of course, but the original and other copies still exist. The land is mine, but how can I take it back? How can we ever rebuild what we had?

When we break free of our "teachers," we will kill at least some of them. I see no way to avoid this. If they have to, and if they can, they'll kill us to stop our escape. The way they rape us, the way they lash us, the way they let some of us die—all that tells me they don't value our lives. Do their families know what they're doing? Do the police know? Are some of these "teachers" cops themselves or

relatives of cops?

A great many people must know that *something* is going on. Each shift of our "teachers" stays with us for at least a week, then goes away for a week. Where do they tell people they've been? The area must be full of people who know, at least, that something unusual is happening. That's why once we've freed ourselves, I don't see how we can stay here. Too many people here will hate us either because we've killed their men in our escape or because they won't be able to forgive us for the wrongs that they, their families, or their friends have done us.

Earthseed lives. Enough of us know it and believe it for it to live on in us. Earthseed lives and will live. But Jarret's Crusaders have strangled Acorn. Acorn is dead.

I keep saying that I need to write about Bankole, and I keep not doing it. I was a zombie for days after I saw his body thrown into the bare hole they made Lucio Figueroa dig. They said none of their prayers over him, and, of course they refused to allow us to have services for him.

I saw him alive on the day the Crusaders invaded. I know I did. What happened? He was a healthy man, and no fool. He would not have provoked armed men to kill him. We're not allowed to talk to our men, but I had to find out what happened. I kept trying until I found a moment to talk to Harry Balter. I wanted it to be Harry so I could tell him about Zahra.

We managed to meet in the field as we worked with only our own community members nearby. We were harvesting—often in the rain—salad greens, onions, potatoes, carrots, and squashes, all planted and tended by Acorn, of course. We should also have been harvesting acorns—should already have harvested them—but we

weren't permitted to do that. Some of us were being made to cut down both the mature live oak and pine trees and the saplings that we had planted. These trees not only commemorated our dead and provided us with much protein, but also they helped hold the hillside near our cabins in place. Somehow, our "teachers" have gotten the idea that we worshipped trees, thus we must have no trees nearby except those that produce the fruit and nuts that our "teachers" like to eat. Funny how that worked out. The orange, lemon, grapefruit, persimmon, pear, walnut, and avocado trees were good. All others were wicked temptations.

This is what Harry told me, bit by bit, during the times we managed to be near one another in our work.

"They used the collars, you know?" he said. "On that first day, they waited until we were all conscious. Then they came in and one of them said, 'We don't want you to make any mistakes. We want you to understand how this is going to work.' Then they started with Jorge Cho, and he screamed and writhed like a worm on a hook. Then they got Alan Faircloth, then Michael, then Bankole.

"Bankole was awake, but not really alert. He was just sitting on the floor, holding his head between his hands, staring down. They had taken all the furniture out by then, and piled it in a heap out where the trucks were. So none of us fell on anything but the floor. When they used the collar on him, he didn't make a sound. He just toppled over onto his side and twitched, sort of convulsed. He never screamed, never said a word. But he went into worse convulsions than any of the others had. Then he was dead. That was all. Michael said the collar had triggered a massive heart attack."

Harry didn't say more for a long time—or maybe he

did, and I just didn't hear it. I was crying in spite of myself. I could be quiet, but I couldn't stop the tears. Then I heard him whisper, as we passed one another again, "I'm sorry, Lauren. God, I'm sorry. He was a good guy."

Bankole had delivered both of Harry's children. Bankole had delivered everyone's children, including his own daughter. Without believing in Earthseed, or even in Acorn, he had stayed and worked hard to make it all work. He had done more than anyone to make it work. How stupid and pointless that he should die at the hands of men who didn't know him or care about him or even intend to kill him. They just didn't know how to use the powerful weapons they possessed. They gassed Zahra to death by mistake because they didn't take her size into consideration. They shocked Bankole into a heart attack by mistake because they didn't take his age into consideration. It must have been his age. He'd had no heart trouble before. He was a strong, healthy man who should have lived to see his daughter grow up and maybe later father a son or another daughter.

It was all I could do not to fold up among the rows of plants and just lie there and moan and cry. But I stayed upright, somehow managed not to attract our "teachers' " attentions.

After a time, I told him about Zahra. "I really believe it was her size," I finished. "Maybe these people don't know much about their weapons. Or maybe they just don't care. Maybe both. None of them lifted a finger to help Teresa."

There was another long, long silence. We worked and Harry got himself under control. When he spoke again, his voice was steady.

"Olamina, we've got to kill these bastards!"

He almost never called me Olamina. We'd known each

other since we were both in diapers. He called me Lauren except during the more important Gathering Day ceremonies. He had called me Olamina for the first time when I Welcomed his first child into the Acorn community, and into Earthseed. It was as though for him the name were a title.

"First we've got to get rid of these collars," I said. "Then we have to find out what happened to the kids. If…if they're alive, we have to find out where they are."

"Do you think they are alive?"

"I don't know." I drew a deep breath. "I'd give almost anything to know where my Larkin is and whether she's all right." Another pause. "These people lie about almost everything. But there must be records somewhere. There must be *something*. We've got to try to find out. Gather information. Seek weakness. Watch, wait, and do what you have to to stay alive!"

A "teacher" was coming toward us. Either he had spotted us whispering as we worked or he was just checking. I let Harry move past me. Our few moments of talk were over.

THIRTEEN

From EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING

When vision fails
Direction is lost.

When direction is lost
Purpose may be forgotten.

When purpose is forgotten
Emotion rules alone.

When emotion rules alone, Destruction…
destruction.

FROM ACORN, I WAS taken to a reeducation camp that was housed in an old maximum-security prison in Del Norte County, just north of Humboldt County. Pelican Bay State Prison, the thing had been called. It became Pelican Bay Christian Reeducation Camp. I have no memory of it, I'm glad to say, but people who spent time there as adults and older kids have told me that even though it was no longer called a prison, it reeked of suffering. Because of its prison structure, it lent itself more easily than did Acorn to isolating people, not only from society but from one another. It also provided enough room for a nursery that was completely separate from the heathen inmates who might

contaminate the children. I was cared for at the Pelican Bay nursery for several months. I know this because I was fingerprinted, footprinted, and geneprinted there, and my records were stored at the Christian American Church of Crescent City. They were supposed to be accessible only to camp authorities, who were to prevent me from being adopted by my heathen biological parents, and to whoever did adopt me. Also, there I was given my name: Asha Vere. Asha Vere was the name of a character in a popular Dreamask program.

Dreamasks—also known as head cages, dream books, or simply, Masks—were new then, and were beginning to edge out some of the virtual-reality stuff. Even the early ones were cheap—big ski-mask-like devices with goggles over the eyes. Wearing them made people look not-quite-human. But the masks made computer-stimulated and guided dreams available to the public, and people loved them. Dreamasks were related to old-fashioned lie detectors, to slave collars, and to a frighteningly efficient form of audiovisual subliminal suggestion. In spite of the way they looked, Dreamasks were lightweight, clothlike, and comfortable. Each one offered wearers a whole series of adventures in which they could identify with any of several characters. They could live their character's fictional life complete with realistic sensation. They could submerge themselves in other, simpler, happier lives. The poor could enjoy the illusion of wealth, the ugly could be beautiful, the sick could be healthy, the timid could be bold….

Jarret's people worried that this new entertainment would be like a drug to the "morally weak." To avoid

their censure, Dreamasks International made a number of religious programs—programs that particularly featured Christian American characters. Asha Vere was one of those characters.

Asha Vere was a tall, beautiful, Amazon-like Black Christian American woman who ran around rescuing people from heathen cults, anti-Christian plots, and squatter-camp pimps. I suppose someone thought that naming me after such an upright character might stifle any hereditary inclination in me toward heathenism. So I was stuck with the name. And so, by the way, were a lot of other women. Strong female characters were out of fashion in the fiction of the time. President Jarret and his followers in Christian America believed that one of the things that had gone wrong with the country was the intrusion of women into "men's business." I've seen recordings of him saying this and large audiences of both men and women cheering and applauding wildly. In fact, I've discovered that Asha Vere was originally intended to be a man, Aaron Vere, but a Dreamask executive convinced his colleagues that it was time for a hit series starring a tough-tender, Christian American female. He was right. There was such a hunger for interesting female characters that, as silly as the Asha Vere stories were, people liked them. And surprising numbers of people named their girl children "Asha" or "Vere" or "Asha Vere."

My name, eventually, was Asha Vere Alexander, daughter of Madison Alexander and Kayce Guest Alexander. These were middle-class Black members of the Church of Christian America in Seattle. They adopted me during the Al-Can war when they moved from Seattle—which had been hit by several missiles—

down to Crescent City, where Kayce's mother Layla Guest lived. Ironically, Layla Guest was a refugee from Los Angeles. But she was a much richer refugee than my mother had been. Crescent City, a big, booming town among the redwoods, was so near Pelican Bay that Layla volunteered at the Pelican Bay nursery. It was Layla who brought Kayce and me together. Kayce didn't really want me. I was a big, dark-skinned, solemn baby, and she didn't like my looks. "She was a grim, stone-faced little thing," I heard her say later to her friends. "And she was as plain as a stone. I was afraid for her—afraid that if I didn't take her, no one would."

Both Kayce and Layla believed it was the duty of good Christian Americans to give homes to the many orphaned children from squatter settlements and heathen cults. If one couldn't be an Asha Vere, rescuing all sorts of people, one could at least rescue one or two unfortunate children and raise them properly.

Five months after Layla introduced her daughter to me, the Alexanders adopted me. I didn't exactly become their daughter, but they meant to do their duty—to raise me properly and save me from whatever depraved existence I might have had with my biological parents.

FROM *The Journals of Lauren Oya Olamina*
SUNDAY, DECEMBER 4, 2033

They have begun to let us alone more on Sundays after services. I suppose they're tired of using up their own Sundays to lash us into memorizing chapters of the Bible. After five or six hours of services and a meal of boiled vegetables, we are told to rest in our quarters and thank

God for his goodness to us.

We aren't permitted to do anything. To do anything other than Bible study would be, in their view, "work," and a violation of the Fourth Commandment. We're to sit still, not speak, not repair our clothing or our shoes—we're all in rags since all but two sets per person of our clothing have been confiscated. We're allowed to read the Bible, pray, and sleep. If we're caught doing anything more than that, we're lashed.

Of course, the moment we're left alone, we do as we like. We hold whispered conversations, we clean and repair our things as best we can, we share information. And I write. Only on Sundays can we do these things in daylight.

We're permitted no electric light and no oil lamps, so we have only the window for light. During the week, it's dark when we get up and dark when we're shut in to sleep. During the week, we are machines—or domestic animals.

The only conveniences we're permitted are a galvanized bucket which we must all use as a toilet and a 20-liter plastic bottle of water fitted with a cheap plastic siphon pump. We each have one plastic bowl from which we both eat and drink. It's odd about the bowls. They're bright shades of blue, red, yellow, orange, and green. They're the only colorful things in our prison room—bright, cheerful lies. They're what you see first when you walk in. Mary Sullivan calls them our dog dishes. We hate them, but we use them. What choice do we have? Our only "legal" individual possessions are our bowls, our clothing, our blankets—one each—and our Camp Christian-issued paper King James Bibles.

On Sundays when we're fortunate enough to be let alone early, I take out paper and pencil and use my Bible as a desk.

My writing is a way for me to remind myself that I am human, that God is Change, and that I will escape this place. As irrational as the feeling may be, my writing still comforts me.

Other people find other comforts. Mary Sullivan and Allie combine their blankets and make love to one another late at night. It comforts them. Their sleeping place is next to mine, and I hear them at it. They aren't the only ones who do it, but they're the only pair so far that stays together.

"Do we disgust you?" Mary Sullivan whispered to me one morning with characteristic bluntness. We had been awakened later than usual and we could just see each other in the half-light. I could see Mary sitting up beside a still-sleeping Allie.

I looked at her, surprised. She's a tall woman—almost my size—angular and bony, but with an interesting-looking, expressive face. She looked as though she had always had plenty of hard, physical work to do, but not always enough to eat. "Do you love my friend?" I asked her.

She blinked, drew back as though she was about to tell me to mind my own business or to go to hell. But after a moment, she said in her harsh voice, "Of course I do!"

I managed a smile, although I don't know whether she could see it, and I nodded. "Then be good to one another," I said. "And if there's trouble, you and your sisters stand with us, with Earthseed." We're the strongest single group among the prisoners. The Sullivans and the Gamas have tended to group themselves with us, anyway, although nothing had been said. Well, now I've said something, at least to Mary Sullivan.

After a moment, she nodded, unsmiling. She wasn't a woman who smiled often.

I worry that someone will break ranks and report Allie and Mary, but so far, no one has reported anyone for anything, although our "teachers" keep inviting us to report one another's sins. There has been trouble now and then. Squatter-camp women have gotten into fights over food or possessions, and the rest of us stopped things before they got too loud—before a "teacher" arrived and demanded to know what was going on and who was responsible.

And there is one young squatter-camp woman, Crystal Blair, who seems to be a natural bully. She hits or shoves people, takes their food or their small possessions. She amuses herself by telling lies to cause fights. ("Do you know what she said about you? I heard her! She said…") She snatches things from people, sometimes making no secret of what she's doing. She doesn't want the pitiful possessions. Sometimes she makes a show of breaking them. She wants the other women to know that she can do what she damned well pleases, and they can't stop her. She has power, and they don't.

We've taught her to let Earthseed women and our possessions alone. We stood together, and let her know we're willing to make her life even more of a misery to her than it already is. We discovered by accident that all we had to do was hold her down and tug on her collar. The collar punishes her, and it punishes me and the other sharers among us if we were stupid enough to watch her suffering, but it leaves no marks. If we use her clothing to tie and gag her, then with just an occasional tug on her collar we can give her a hellish night. After we put her through one such night, she let us alone. She tormented other women. Tormenting people was her particular comfort.

We worry about her. She's crazier than most of us, and she's trouble, but she hates our "teachers" more than we do.

She won't go to them for help. In time, though, one of her victims might. We watch her. We try to keep her from going too far.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 11, 2033

More new people have been brought here—ragged, scrawny people, all strangers. Every day this week, a maggot has arrived to unload new people in groups of three, four, or five. We've finished building a long, shedlike extension onto the school with lumber that the "teachers" trucked in. This extension is four bare rooms of shelf beds intended to house 30 people each. Each wall is covered with three layers of shelves plus an access ladder or two. Each shelf is to be a long, narrow bed intended to sleep two people, usually either feet to feet or head to head. The new people are each given what we have: a blanket, a plastic bowl, a Bible, and a shelf where they must sleep and store their things. We still sleep on the floor in our rooms, but everything else is the same.

Like us, the new people are using buckets as toilets. Some of us are being made to dig a cesspit. I took some lashes for pointing out that it was being put in a bad place. It could contaminate the underground water that feeds our wells. That could make us all sick, including our "teachers."

But our "teachers" know everything. They don't need advice from a woman, and a heathen woman at that. It was entirely their own decision a few days later to relocate the cesspit downhill and far away from the wells.

Someone has put up a sign at the logging-road gate: "Camp Christian Reeducation Facility." The Crusaders have

surrounded the place with a Lazor-wire fence, so there's no safe entry or exit except at the gate. Lazor wire is made up of strands of wire so thin that they're hard to see. They slice into the flesh of the wild animals who blunder into them.

I've asked some of the strangers what's happening outside. Do people know what a reeducation camp really is? Are there other camps? Is there resistance? What's Jarret doing? What's going on?

Most of the new people won't talk to me. They're weary, frightened, beaten people. Those who are willing to talk know only that they were either arrested or snatched from their lives as squatters, drifters, or petty crooks.

Several of the new people are sharers. "Bad seed if there ever was bad seed," our "teachers" say. "The heathen children of drug addicts." They treat known sharers as objects of suspicion, contempt, and ugly amusement. They're so easy to torment. No challenge at all.

We have not given ourselves away, yet, we sharers of Earthseed. We've worked hard at concealing ourselves, and, I admit, we've been lucky. None of us has been pushed beyond our limits at a time when our "teachers" might notice. All of us have had years of hiding in plain sight to help us. Even the Mora girls, only 14 and 15, have managed to hide what they are.

I kept up my search for someone who could tell me at least a little about the outside. In the end, I didn't find my informant. He found me. He was a young Black man, bone thin, scarred, careful, but not beaten down. His name was David Turner.

"Day," he said when we found ourselves digging side by side in the stupid, dangerous cesspit that was later abandoned. I think now that he only spoke to me because we weren't supposed to speak.

I looked a question at him as I threw a shovelful of dirt out of the hole.

"Name of David," he said. "Call me Day."

"Olamina," I said without thinking.

"Yeah?" he said.

"Yes."

"Different kind of name."

I sighed, glanced at him, liked the stubborn, unbeaten look of him, and said, "Lauren."

He gave me a quick grin. "People call you Laurie?"

"Not if they expect me to answer," I said.

I guess we were a little careless. Above, one of our "teachers" lashed me hard, and I convulsed and fell. I've noticed before that if a collared man and woman are talking together, it's the woman who tends to be lashed. Women are temptresses, you see. We drag innocent men into trouble. From the time of Adam and Eve women have dragged innocent men into trouble. Anyway, I was lashed hard, but only once. After that, I was more careful.

Being lashed hard several times is enough to induce temporary coordination problems and memory loss. Day told me later that he'd seen a man lashed until the man didn't know his own name. I believe him. I know that when I saw Bankole's dead body, and I turned on my bearded guard, I had never in my life been more intent on killing another person. I was dropped where I stood with a hard shock, then lashed several more times, and Allie tells me that the way I jerked and flopped around the ground, she thought I'd break my bones. I woke up very sore, covered in bruises, sprains, abrasions, and bloody rock cuts, but that wasn't the worst.

The worst was the way I felt afterward. I don't mean the physical pain. This place is a university of pain. I mean

what I wrote before. I was a zombie for several days after the lashing. At first I couldn't even remember that Bankole was dead. Natividad and Allie had to tell me that all over again more than once. And I couldn't remember what had happened to Acorn, why we were all shut up in one room of our own school, where the men were, where the children were….

I haven't written about this until now. When I understood it, it scared me to death. It scared me into mewling in a corner like a terrorized three-year-old.

After surviving Robledo, I knew that strangers could appear and steal or destroy everything and everyone I loved. People and possessions could be snatched away. But somehow, it had not occurred to me that…that *bits of my own mind* could be snatched away too. I knew I could be killed. I've never had any illusions about that. I could be disabled. I knew that too. But I had not thought that another person, just by pushing a small button, then smiling and pushing it again and again….

He did smile, my bearded teacher. That came back to me later. All of it came back to me. When it did….Well, that's when I retreated to my corner, whimpering and moaning. The son of a bitch smiled and pressed his button over and over as though he were fucking me, and he grinned while he watched me groaning and thrashing.

My brother said a collar makes you envy the dead. As bad as that sounds, it didn't, couldn't, convey to me, how a collar makes you hate. It teaches you whole new magnitudes of utter hatred. I knew almost nothing about hate until this thing was put around my neck. Now, sometimes it's all I can do to stop myself from trying again to kill one of them and then dying the way Emery did.

I've been talking off and on to Day Turner. Whenever

we can, when we pass one another or are put to work in the same general area, we've talked. I've encouraged Travis and Harry and the other men to talk to him. I think he'll tell us anything he can that will help us. This is a summary of what he's passed on to us so far:

Day had walked over the Sierras from his last dead-end, low-paying job in Reno, Nevada. He had drifted north and west, hoping to find at least a chance to work his way out of poverty. He had no family, but for protection, he walked with two friends. All had been well until he and his friends reached Eureka. There, they had heard that one of the churches offered overnight shelter and meals and temporary work to willing men. The church was, no surprise, the Church of Christian America.

The work was helping to repair and paint a couple of old houses that the church intended to use as part of their orphaned-children's home. There were no orphans on site—or none that Day saw, or I suppose we would all have badgered him to death about our own children. You would think that there were enough real orphans in this filthy world. How dare anything that calls itself a church create new orphans with its maggots and its collars?

Anyway, Day and his friends liked the idea of doing something for kids and earning a few dollars as well as a bed and a few meals. But they were unlucky. While they slept on their first night in the church's men's dormitory, a small group of the men there tried to rob the place. Day says he had nothing to do with robbery. He says he doesn't give a damn whether we believe him or not, but that he's never stolen, except to eat, and he'd never in his life steal from a church. He was raised by a very religious uncle and aunt, now dead, and thanks to their early training, there were some things he just wouldn't do. But the thieves were

said to be Black, and Day and his friends were Black, so Day and his friends were presumed guilty.

I found myself believing him. That may be stupid of me, but I like him, and he doesn't strike me as a liar or a church robber.

He says the church's security people swarmed over the dormitories, and the men awoke and ran in all directions. They were all free poor men. When trouble erupted, and there was no real profit to be had, most of them never thought of doing anything other than getting away—especially when the shooting started.

Day didn't have a gun. One of his friends did, but the three of them got separated. Then they all got caught.

He and 18 or 20 other men were caught, and all the Black ones went to jail. Some were charged with violent crimes—armed robbery and assault. The rest were charged with vagrancy—which is a far more serious crime than it once was. The vagrants were found guilty and indentured to the Church of Christian America. Day's friends were charged with felonies as part of the first group because they were found together and one had a gun. Day was in the vagrant group. He had been indentured to work for 30 days for the church. He had already been shifted around and forced to work for more than two months. They lashed him when he complained that his sentence was up. At first they said he could go free if he could prove he had a job waiting for him outside. Of course since he was a stranger to the area, and since he had no free time to look for a job, it was impossible for him to get outside work. Local vagrants, on the other hand, were, one by one, rescued by relatives and friends, who promised to either give them jobs or feed and house them so that they would no longer be vagrant.

Day had done construction work, painting,

groundskeeping, and janitorial work. He had been given a thorough physical examination, then been required to donate blood twice. He had been encouraged to offer to donate a kidney or a cornea, after which he could heal and go free. This terrified him. He refused, but he couldn't help knowing that his organs, and, in fact, his life could be taken from him at any time. Who would know? Who would care? He wondered why they had not killed him already.

Then they moved him to Camp Christian for reeducation. He was told that there was hope for him—that he could, if he chose, learn to be a servant of God and God's true church and a loyal citizen of the greatest country in the world. He said he was already a Christian. They said, in effect, "Prove it." They said he would be accepted among them when they judged him truly penitent and educated in the truths of the Bible.

Then Day quoted them Exodus 21:16—"And he that stealeth a man and selleth him, or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to death." Day was lashed for his choice of scripture, of course, and he was told that the people of Christian America well knew that the devil could quote scripture.

Most people don't know about the camps, Day says. He's learned from talking to other collared men that there are a few small camps like Camp Christian and at least two big ones—much bigger than Camp Christian. One of the big ones is up at an abandoned prison in Del Norte County and the other is down in Fresno County. People don't realize how free poor vagrants are being treated, but he's afraid that even if they did know, they wouldn't care. The likelihood is that people with legal residences would be glad to see a church taking charge of the thieving, drug-taking, drug-selling, disease-spreading, homeless free poor.

“Back when I was at home, my aunt and uncle would have felt like that,” Day said. “We walk the highways and scrounge and scavenge and ask for work, and all of that reminds people that what’s happened to us can happen to them. They don’t like to think about stuff like that, so they get mad at us. They make the cops arrest us or run us out of town. They call us names and wish somebody would do something to make us disappear. And now, somebody is doing just that!”

He’s right. There are plenty of people who would think the Church was doing something generous and necessary—teaching deadbeats to work and be good Christians. No one would see a problem until the camps were a lot bigger and the people in them weren’t just drifters and squatters. As far as we of Earthseed are concerned, that’s already happened, but who are we? Just weird cultists who practice strange rites, so no doubt there are nice, ordinary people who would be glad to see us taught to behave ourselves too.

How many people, I wonder, can be penned up and tormented—reeducated—before it begins to matter to the majority of Americans? How does this penning people up look to other countries? Do they know? Would they care? There are worse things happening here in the States and elsewhere, I know. There’s war, for instance.

In fact, we are at war. The United States is at war with Alaska and Canada. People are calling it the Al-Can war. I know Jarret wanted a war, was working to get one started. But until Day told me, I hadn’t realized it had begun. There have already been exchanges of missiles and a few vicious border battles. I told Allie about this later, and she thought about it for a moment.

“Who’s winning?” she asked.

I shook my head. “Day didn’t tell me. Hell, I didn’t

ask."

She shrugged. "Yeah. It doesn't much matter to us, does it?"

"I don't know," I said.

We are roughly 250 inmates, and, by my most recent count, 20 guards. Just think: if we could all move at the same time, 10 or l2 people per guard, we might be able to…to….

We might be able to die like Teresa. Just one "teacher" could, with one finger, send us all sprawling and writing on the ground. We might be able to die, every one of us, without doing much more than startling our guards.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 18, 2033

Now I have been raped.

It happened twice. Once on Monday, and again yesterday. It is my Christmas gift from Christian America.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 25, 2033

I need to write about what has been happening to me. I don't want to, but I need to.

To be a sharer is to feel the pleasure and the pain—the apparent pleasure and the apparent pain—of other people. There have been times when I've felt the pleasure of one of our "teachers" when he lashed someone. The first time it happened—or rather, the first time I understood what was happening, I threw up.

When someone cries out in pain, I'm careful not to look. If I happen to see someone double up, so far I've been able to lean against a wall or a tool or a friend or a tree.

Somehow, though, it never occurred to me that I had to protect myself from the pleasures of our “teachers.”

There are a few men here, though, a few “teachers,” who lash us until they have orgasms. Our screams and convulsions and pleas and sobs are what these men need to feel sexually satisfied. I know of three who seem to need to lash someone to get sexual pleasure. Most often, they lash a woman, then rape her. Sometimes the lashing is enough for them. I don’t want to know this as clearly as I do know it, but I can’t help myself. These men feast on our pain—and they call us parasites.

Rape is done with a pretense of secrecy. After all, these men come to the camp and do a tour of duty. Then at least some of them must go home to their wives and kids. Except for Reverend Joel Locke and his three top assistants, who work here full time, the men who come here still live in the real world. They rape, but they pretend they don’t. They say they’re religious, but power has corrupted even the best of them. I don’t like to admit it, but some of them are, in a strange way, decent, ordinary men. I mean that they believe in what they are doing. They’re not all sadists or psychopaths. Some of them seem truly to feel that collecting minor criminals in places like Camp Christian is right and necessary for the good of the country. They disapprove of the rape and the unnecessary lashings, but they do believe that we inmates are, somehow, enemies of the country. Their superiors have told them that parasites and heathens like us brought down “America the mighty.” America was the strongest country on Earth, but people like us went whoring after foreign religions and refused to do our duty as citizens. We women lost all modesty and offered ourselves in the streets, and the men who should have controlled us became our pimps.

That's the short version of how evil we are and why we deserve to be in collars. The other side of this picture is how our hardworking, long-suffering "teachers" are trying to "help" us.

One of the men who has been after Jorge's sister Cristina specialized in this strange, self-pitying attitude. He talked to her about his wheelchair-bound wife, about his disrespectful children, about how poor they all are. She says she begged him to let her alone, and he threw her down and forced her. He said he was a loyal, hardworking Christian American, and he was entitled to some pleasure in his life. But when he had finished, he begged her to forgive him. Insanity.

My rape happened at the end of a very cold, rainy day. I had been given cooking duties. This meant I got to clean myself up, stay warm and dry, and, for once, get enough to eat. I was feeling both grateful for this and ashamed of my gratitude. I worked with Natividad and two of the Gama women, Catarina and Joan, and at the end of the day, we were all taken away to the cabins and raped.

Of the four of us, only I was a sharer. Of the four of us, only I endured not only my own pain and humiliation, but the wild, intense pleasure of my rapist. There are no words to explain the twisted, schizoid ugliness of this.

We can't bathe often enough. We get no hot water and little soap unless we get kitchen duty. If we ask to be allowed to bathe, it's called vanity. Yet we are viewed with disgust and contempt if we stink. We are said to "stink with sin."

So be it.

I have decided to stink like a corpse. I have decided that I would rather get a disease from being filthy than go on attracting the attentions of these men. I will be filthy. I

will stink. I will pay no attention to my hair or my clothing.

I must do this, or I will kill myself.

2035

From EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING

Self is.

Self is body and bodily perception. Self is thought, memory, belief. Self creates. Self destroys. Self learns, discovers, becomes. Self shapes. Self adapts. Self invents its own reasons for being. To shape God, shape Self.

FOURTEEN

From EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING

Take comfort.
Each move toward the Destiny,
Each achievement of the Destiny,
Must mean new beginnings,
New worlds,
A rebirth of Earthseed.
Alone,
Each of us is mortal.
Yet through Earthseed,
Through the Destiny,
We join.
We are purposeful
Immortal
Life!

SOMEHOW, MY MOTHER ENDURED more than a year of slavery at Camp Christian. How she did it, how she survived it, I can only guess from her writings of 2033 and 2035. Her record of 2034 has been lost. She did write during 2034. I have no doubt of that. She couldn't have gone for a year without writing. I've found occasional references to notes made then. No doubt by then, she was writing on whatever scraps of paper she could find.

She obviously liked to keep her writing when she could, but I suspect that somehow it helped her just to

do it, whether she was able to keep it or not. The act of writing itself was a kind of therapy.

The most important loss is this: There was at least one major escape attempt. The people of Acorn took no part in it, but of course they suffered for it later along with the rest of Camp Christian. Its leader was the same David Turner that my mother had met and liked in 2033. I know this because I've spoken to people who were there, who survived the effort, and who remember the suffering.

My best informant was a plainspoken woman named Cody Smith, who in December of 2034 had been arrested for vagrancy in Garberville and transported to Camp Christian. She was one of the survivors of the rebellion, although as a result of it, she suffered nerve damage and eventual blindness. She was beaten and kicked as well as electronically lashed. Here's her story as she told it to me:

"Day Turner's people were convinced that they could overwhelm the guards by piling onto them three or more to one. They believed they could kill the guards before their collars disabled them. Lauren Olamina said no. She said the guards were never all together, were never all outside at the same time. She said one guard missed was one guard who could kill all of us with just one finger. Day liked her. I don't know why. She was big like a man and not pretty, but he liked her. He just didn't believe she was right. He thought she was scared. But he forgave her because she was a woman. That drove her crazy. The more she tried to talk him out of it, the more determined he was to do it. Then he asked her if she was going to give him away, and she got really quiet and so mad he actually took a step back

from her. She could do that. She didn't get loud when she got mad, she got real quiet. She scared people.

"She asked him who the hell did he think she was, and he said he was starting to not be sure. There was some bad feeling after that. She stopped talking to him and began talking to her own people. It was hard to talk, dangerous to talk. It was against the rules. People had to whisper and mutter and talk without moving their lips and not look at the people they were talking to. They got lashed if they were caught. Messages got passed from one person to another. Sometimes they got changed or messed up and you couldn't tell what people were trying to tell you. Sometimes someone told the guards. New people brought in from the road would do that—tell what they had no business telling. They got a little extra food for it or a warm shirt or something. But if we caught them at it, they never did it again. We saw to that. There were always a few, though. They did it for a reward or because they were scared or because they had started to believe all those sermons and Bible classes and prayer meetings and the other stuff they made us sit through or stand through when we were almost too tired to live. I think a few of the women did it so the guards would treat them better in bed. Some guards liked to hurt you. So for us, talking was dangerous even if no guard saw you do it.

"Anyway, it didn't seem that anyone gave Day Turner away. Lauren Olamina just told her people that when it happened, they should lie face-down on the ground with their hands behind their necks. Some of them didn't want to. They thought Day was right. But she kept at them, pushing them, asking them about lashings they had seen—one guard lashing eight or nine

people at the same time with just one finger….She got herself lashed over and over, trying to talk to them—to the men in her group especially. I think Day worked on them at night when men and women were locked up separate. You know the kind of shit men say to one another when they want to stop other men from listening to a woman. From what I heard, Travis Douglas was the one who kept Olamina's men in line. He wasn't all that big, but he had a force to him. People trusted him, listened to him, liked him. And for some reason, Travis trusted Olamina. He didn't like what she was telling them to do, but he…like he believed in her, you know.

"When the break came, most of Olamina's people did what she had told them to do. That saved them from being shot or from being beaten as badly as the ones like me who didn't get on the ground fast enough. Day's people started grabbing guards, and the Acorn people dropped like stones. When the pain hit, they were already getting down on the ground, all but a guy named King—Jeff King—big, good-looking blond guy—and three women. Two were named Scolari—sisters or something—and Channa Ryan. I knew Channa Ryan. She just couldn't stand it anymore. She was pregnant, but not showing much yet. She figured if she died taking one of the guards and a guard's baby with her, it would be a good deal. There was this one particular guy—ugly son of a bitch who washed himself maybe once a week. But he used to make her go to his cabin two or three times a week. He had his fun with her. She wanted to get him. She didn't, though.

"Day's people killed one guard. Just one, and it was a woman who got him—that evil bitch Crystal Blair. She

died for it, but she got him. I don't know why she hated the guards so much. They didn't rape her, didn't pay that much attention to her. I guess it was just that they took her freedom. She was a big pain in the ass while she was alive, but people kind of respected her after she was dead. She ripped that guard's throat out with her teeth!

"Day's people hurt a couple of other guards, but it cost them 15 of their own. Fifteen dead just to start with. Some others were lashed to death or almost to death later. Some were kicked and stomped as well as lashed. I was because I was too close to Crystal Blair when she killed that one guard. Day got killed too, but not until later. Later, they hanged him. By then, he was so busted up, I doubt he knew what was going on. The rest of us got hurt, but not so bad. The ones who could walk had to go out the next day to work. If we had headaches or teeth kicked in or bad gashes or bruises from being kicked with boots, it didn't matter. The guards said if they couldn't beat the devil out of us, they'd work him out of us. The ones who couldn't walk disappeared. I don't know what happened to them—maybe killed, maybe taken away for medical treatment. We never saw them again. Everyone else worked for sixteen hours straight. They lashed you if you stopped to pee. You had to just do it on yourself and keep working. They did that for three days straight. Work sixteen hours—dig a hole. Fill it up. Chop trees. Make firewood. Dig another hole. Fill it up. Paint the cabins. Chop weeds. Dig a hole. Fill it up. Drag rocks from the hills. Break them to gravel. Dig a hole. Fill it up.

"A couple of people went crazy. One woman just fell down on the ground and started screaming and

crying. She wouldn't stop. The other one, a big man with scars all over his face, he started running and screaming—going nowhere, running in circles. They disappeared too. Three days. We didn't get enough to eat. You never got enough to eat unless you got kitchen duty. Every night they preached hellfire and damnation at us and made us memorize Bible verses for at least an hour before they'd let us sleep. Then it was like we hadn't slept at all and they were getting us up to do it all again. It was hell. Plain hell. No devil could have made a better one."

Cody Smith. She was an old woman when I met her —illiterate, poor, and scarred. If her version of the break and its aftermath is true, it's no wonder my mother never wrote much about it after her captivity. I've never found anyone who heard her talk much about it.

But at least she got most of her own people through the rebellion. She lost only three, and two others—the Mora
sisters—had given away their status as sharers. I wonder that all the sharers hadn't given themselves away. On the other hand, when everyone is screaming, I suppose sharers' screams don't draw special attention. I don't know how the Moras gave themselves away, but Cody Smith and other informants have told me they did. It may have been the reason that after the rebellion, they were raped more often than the other women were. They never gave any other sharer away.

That was my mother's 2034. I wouldn't have wished it on her. I wouldn't have wished it on anyone.

What was done to my mother and to many other

interned people of her time was illegal in almost every way. It was never legal to collar non-criminals, never legal to confiscate their property or separate husband from wife or to force either to work without pay of some kind. The matter of separating children from parents, however, might have been managed almost legally.

Vagrancy laws were much expanded, and vagrant adults with children could lose custody of the children, unless they were able to establish homes for them within a specified period of time. In some counties, job-placement help was available from churches and local businesses, and the jobs had to provide at least room and board for the family, even if there were no salary. Vagrant women often became unsalaried household help or poorly paid surrogate mothers. In other counties, there was no help at all for vagrants. They had to make a proper home for their children or their children would be rescued from their inadequate, unfit hands.

Not surprisingly, children were "rescued" this way much more often from vagrants who were considered heathens than from those who were seen as acceptable Christians. And "heathens" who were poor, but not true vagrants, not homeless, might find themselves reclassified as vagrants so that their children could be placed in good Christian America homes. The idea, of course, was to make good Christian Americans of them in spite of the wickedness, or at best, the errors of their parents.

It's hard to believe that kind of thing happened here, in the United States in the twenty-first century, but it did. It *shouldn't* have happened, in spite of all the

chaos that had gone before. Things were healing. People like my mother were starting small businesses, living simply, becoming more prosperous. Crime was down in spite of the sad things that happened to the Noyer family and to Uncle Marc. Even my mother said that things were improving. Yet Andrew Steele Jarret was able to scare, divide, and bully people, first into electing him President, then into letting him fix the country for them. He didn't get to do everything he wanted to do. He was capable of much greater fascism. So were his most avid followers.

For people like my mother, Jarret's fanatical followers were the greater danger. During Jarret's first year in office, the worst of his followers ran amok. Filled with righteous superiority and popular among the many frightened, ordinary citizens who only wanted order and stability, the fanatics set up the camps. Meanwhile, Jarret himself was busy with the ridiculous, obscene Al-Can war. If Jarret's thugs weren't locking poor people into collars, Jarret himself was seducing them into the military and feeding them into what turned out to be a useless, stupid exercise in destruction. The already-weakened country all but collapsed. Too many Americans, whether or not they belonged to CA, had family and friends in both Canada and Alaska. People deserted or left the country to avoid the draft—there was one, at last—and the saying was, during the war, that healthy young men were America's biggest export.

There was much slaughter on both sides of the Canadian border and there were air and naval attacks on the coastal cities of Alaska. The war was like an exaggeration of the attempted breakout at Camp

Christian. Much blood was shed, but little was accomplished. The war began in anger, bitterness, and envy at nations who appeared to be on their way up just as our country seemed to be on a downward slide.

Then the war just petered out. At first, there was much fighting, much destruction, much screaming and flag-waving. Then, gradually, over 2034, a terrible, bitter weariness seemed to creep over people. Poor families saw their sons drafted and killed, as they said, "for nothing!" It was harder than ever to buy decent food. Much of our grain over the past few years of climate change and chaos had been imported from Canada, after all. In the end, in late 2034, peace talks began. After that, except for a lot of hard feelings and occasional nasty incidents, the war was over. The border between Canada and America stayed where it had been, and Alaska remained an independent country. It was the first state to officially, completely, successfully secede from the union. People were saying that Jarret's home state of Texas would be next.

In less than a year, Jarret went from being our savior, almost the Second Coming in some people's minds, to being an incompetent son of a bitch who was wasting our substance on things that didn't matter. I don't mean that everyone changed their feelings toward him. Many people never did. My adopted parents never did, even though he cost them a beautiful, intelligent, loving daughter. I grew up hearing about that daughter endlessly. Her name was Kamaria, and she was perfect. I know this because my mother told me about her at least once during every day of my childhood. I could never look as good as Kamaria did or straighten my room as well or do as well with my studies or even

clean a toilet as well—although I find it difficult to believe the perfect little bitch ever cleaned a toilet—or used one.

I didn't know I was still bitter enough to write a thing like that. I shouldn't be. It's foolish to hate someone you've never met, someone who's never harmed you. I believe now that I shifted my resentment safely onto Kamaria, who wasn't there, so that at least until my adolescence, I could love Kayce Alexander. She was, after all, the only mother I knew.

Kamaria Alexander died in a missile attack on Seattle when she was 11 years old, and my adopted parents never stopped blaming—and hating—the Canadians in their grief for her. But they never blamed Jarret—"that good man," "that fine man," "that man of God." Kayce talked that way. So did her friends when she finally moved back to them in Seattle where her neighborhood and her church were scarred, but still standing. Madison Alexander barely spoke at all. He murmured agreement with whatever Kayce said, and he felt me up a lot, but apart from that, he was quiet. My strongest memory of him, when I was four or five, was of his picking me up, putting me in his lap, and feeling me. I didn't know why I didn't like this. I just learned early to stay out of his way as much as I could.

FROM *The Journals of Lauren Oya Olamina*
SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2035

I've been too cold and too miserable, and too sick to do much writing. We've all had flu. We're made to work anyway. Four people died last week during a long, cold

rain. One was pregnant. She gave birth alone in the mud. No one was allowed to help her. She and her baby both died. Two were worked until they dropped. When they dropped, the teachers called them lazy parasites and lashed them. During the night, they died—two men. They were all strangers, highway paupers—"vagrants" who had been forced to come here. They were sick and half-starved when they arrived. Thanks to the cold, wet weather, the lack of heat in our barracks, and the bad diet, we all catch any contagious disease brought to us from the highway or from the towns. Even our "teachers" are suffering with colds and flu. And when they suffer, they take their misery out on us.

All this, and one other thing has made us decide that the time has come to make our own break—or die trying.

We have information—some of us have learned things from our rapists, others just from keeping our eyes and ears open. Also, we have 23 knives—that is, Earthseed, the Sullivans and the Gamas have 23 knives. That's more than one for each guard. Some we've stolen from the trash heap where our "teachers" teach us wastefulness and slovenliness. Other knives are just sharp bits of metal that we've found and wrapped with tape or cloth to protect our hands. They're crude, but they'll cut a human throat. As soon as we've shut our collars off, we'll use the knives. If we're quick and if we move together as we've planned, we should be able to surprise several of our guards before they even think to use their maggots against us.

We know some of us will die in this. Maybe we'll all die. But the way things are going, we'll die anyway. None of us know how long we're to be kept collared. No one who's come here has been released. Even the few people who try to suck up to the "teachers" when they don't have to are still here, still collared. None of us have heard anything

about what's happened to our children. And most of us are sick. None of Earthseed has died since Day's rebellion, but we're sick. And Allie…Allie might die. Or she might be permanently brain damaged. She's one of the reasons I've decided we've got to risk a breakout soon.

Allie and her lover Mary Sullivan were caught last Sunday.

No, I take that back. They weren't caught. They were betrayed. They were betrayed by Beth and Jessica Faircloth. That's the worst. They were betrayed by people who were part of us, part of Earthseed. They were betrayed by people whom Allie and the rest of us had helped to rescue from starvation and slavery back when they had nothing. We took them in, and when their family decided to join Earthseed, when they had done their probationary year, we Welcomed them.

I watched the betrayal. I couldn't stop it. I couldn't do anything. I'm worthless these days, just worthless.

Last Sunday, we had the usual six hours of preaching, this time on the evils of sexual sinfulness. First we heard from Reverend Locke, who runs this place. Then we heard from Reverend Chandler Benton, a minister from Eureka who sometimes drives out to inflict himself on us. Benton preached a vicious and weirdly salacious sermon on the evil, depraved wickedness of bestiality, incest, pedophilia, homosexuality, lesbianism, pornography, masturbation, prostitution, and adultery. It went on and on—stories from current news, Bible stories, long quotations of Old Testament laws and punishments including death by stoning, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the life and death of Jezebel, disease, hellfire, on and on.

But there was nothing at all said about rape. The good Reverend Benton himself has, during earlier visits, made use

of both Adela Ortiz and Cristina Cho. He goes to the cabin—once the Balter house—that is reserved now for visiting VIPs and has the woman of his choice brought to him.

We endure these sermons. They give us a chance to come in out of the rain. We are allowed to sit down and not work. We aren't cold because our "teachers" don't want to be cold. They build a big fire in the school's fireplace once a week. And so for a few hours on Sundays, we are warm, dry, and almost comfortable in our rows on the floor. We're hungry, but we know we'll soon be fed. We're in a drowsy, passive state. Without the rest we get on Sundays, several more of us would be dead. I'm sure of that. Nevertheless, we're being preached at while we're in that drowsy, passive state. I doze sometimes, though we're lashed if we're caught sleeping. I sit up, lean against a wall, and I let myself doze.

I didn't realize it, but the two female Faircloths, it seems, had begun to listen. Worse, they had begun to believe, to be frightened, to be converted. Or perhaps not. Perhaps they had other motives.

We're always being called upon to testify, to give public thanks for all the kindness and generosity that God has shown us in spite of our unworthiness. And we must confess that unworthiness and make a public repentance and a public appeal for God's mercy. We have each been required to do this many times. The more you yield, the more you are required to yield. Our teachers know we don't mean it, know we act out of fear of pain. We simply do as we are told. They hate us for this. They look at us with unmistakable hatred, disgust, and contempt, and they insist that it's love that they feel. Their God requires them to love us, after all. And it's only love that makes them try so hard to help us see the light. They say we're blinded by our own sinful stubbornness to the love and the help that they offer.

“Spare the rod and spoil the child,” they tell us, and we are, at best, still children as far as morality is concerned.

Right.

Anyway, Reverend Benton issued a call to testify. Three people had been ordered to testify. I was one of them. How I was selected, I don’t know, but a scrawny “teacher” with bad teeth had put his hand on my shoulder before services began and ordered me to give testimony. The other two who had been ordered to testify were Ed Gama and a red-haired, one-armed woman, fresh from the highway. Her name was Teal, she had been with us for less than a week, and she was afraid of her shadow. Ed and I have done it before, so we went first to show the stranger what to do. This was the usual practice. I gave thanks for my many blessings, then I confessed to sinful thoughts, to anger, and to resistance to my teachers who were only trying to help me. I apologized to God and to all present again and again for my wickedness. I begged for forgiveness, begged for the strength and the wisdom to do God’s will.

That’s how you do it. That’s how I’ve done it for over a year.

When I finished, Ed did pretty much the same thing. He had his own scripted list of sins and apologies. Teal was bright enough to do as we had done, but she was very frightened. Her voice trembled, and she all but whispered.

In his loud, nasty voice, Reverend Benton said, “Speak up, sister. Let the church hear your testimony.”

Tears spilled from the woman’s eyes, but she managed to raise her voice and repent and ask forgiveness for “all the things I have done wrong.” She must have forgotten the kind of thing that the sermons had “suggested” she confess to. Then she collapsed to her knees and began to sob, out of control, terrified, begging, “Don’t hurt me. Please don’t hurt

me. I'll do anything."

If I had tried to go to her, help her up, and take her back to her space on the floor, I would have been lashed. Human decency is a sin here. Ed and I looked at each other, but neither of us dared to touch her. I suspect that some "teacher" would have helped her back to her place. Lashing her back to her place wouldn't be quite the thing to do under the circumstances.

But there was an interruption. Beth and Jessica Faircloth had gotten up and were picking their way through the congregation, trying not to step on anyone, heading for the altar. When they reached the altar, they fell to their knees. People did this sometimes, gave voluntary testimony in hope of currying favor with the "teachers." It was harmless—or had always been harmless before. And it might buy you a piece of bread or an apple later. In fact, the Faircloths had done it several times. Some of us sneered at them for it, but it had never seemed important to me. Stupid me.

"We've sinned too," Beth cried. "We didn't mean to. We didn't know what to do. We knew it was wrong, but we were afraid."

They were not lashed. I saw Reverend Benton hold up his hand, no doubt telling the "teachers" to let them alone. "Speak, sisters," he said. "Confess your sin. God loves you. God will forgive."

They didn't follow the form this time. Instead they spoke the way they do when they're afraid, when they know they've done something other people might not like, when they're standing together against others. They're not twins. In fact, they're 18- and 19-year-old sisters, but under stress, they act much younger, and they act like twins, finishing one another's sentences, speaking in unison, or repeating

one another's words. Their testimony was like that.

"We saw them doing it," Beth said.

"They've been doing it for a long time now," Jessica added. "We saw them."

"At night," Beth continued. "We knew it was wrong."

"It's dirty and filthy and perverted!" Jessica said.

"You can hear them kissing and making noises," Beth said, making a face, to show her disgust. "Perverted!"

"I never knew Allie was like that, but even before you came to teach us, she lived with another woman," Jessica said. "I thought she was okay because she had a little boy, but now I know she wasn't."

"She must have been doing it with women all the time," Beth echoed.

"Now she does it with Mary Sullivan." Jessica had begun to cry. "It's wrong, but we were afraid to tell before."

"She's strong like a man, and she's mean," Beth said. "We're afraid of her."

And I thought, *Oh no*, *damnit*, *no*! Our "teachers" have mistreated us every day, humiliated us and harangued us. But the misery has gone on for so long, and the sermons have gone on for so long, and we've stood together against it all….

But I suppose something like this was bound to happen sooner or later. I only wish the traitors had been strangers from outside. That's happened before in lesser ways, but after a night or two, we've always managed to teach outsiders to keep their mouths shut about anything they've seen among their fellow inmates. No member of Earthseed has ever betrayed us in any way—until now.

As Allie was dragged to the front of the room to be punished, she shouted at Beth and Jessica, "They'll still rape you, and they'll still lash you and when they're done with

you they'll still kill you!"

And I screamed at them, "She gave you food when you were hungry!"

So the "teachers" lashed me too.

But what they did to Allie and to Mary Sullivan, that went on and on. Mary Sullivan's father Arthur begged them to stop, managed to hit one of them and knock him down. So, of course he was lashed. But he bought no mercy for his daughter. Mary was having terrible convulsions, and they went on lashing her. They lashed both women until neither could scream anymore. They made us watch. I didn't watch. To survive, I kept my head down, my eyes half shut. I've been lashed for this behavior from time to time, but not today. Today, all attention was on the two "sinners."

They lashed Allie and Mary until Mary died.

They lashed them until Allie was lost somewhere within herself. She hasn't spoken a full sentence since the lashing.

Because I spoke for Allie, I was made to dig Mary's grave. Better me than Mary's father. He isn't in his right mind either. He was forced to watch his child tortured to death. He just wanders around, staring. Our teachers lash him, and he screams from the pain, but when they finish, he's no different. They seem to think they can torture him into forgetting his terrible grief and his hate.

I can't stand this. I can't. I don't care if they kill me. I will break free of this or I will be dead.

The Faircloth girls have been given a room in what used to be the King house. They have a whole room to themselves now instead of a room shared with thirty other women. They still wear collars, but they're on permanent cooking duty now. They don't have to chop wood or do fieldwork or construction work or clear brush or dig wells

or graves or do any of the other hard, heavy, dirty work that the rest of us must do. And they don't know how to cook. Somehow, they've never learned to put together a decent meal. So they don't cook for our "teachers." They just cook for us. Of course, they're hated. No one talks to them, but no one does anything to them either. We've been warned to let them alone. And they have been given a certain power over us. They can season our food with spit or dirt or shit, and we know it. Maybe that's what they're doing, and that's why the food is so much worse than it was. I didn't think that was possible—for it to get worse. The Faircloths have managed to ruin garbage. The Sullivan brothers and sisters might kill both Faircloth girls if they get the chance. Old Arthur Sullivan has been sent away. We don't know where. He's out of his mind and our "teachers" weren't able to lash him back to sanity, so they got rid of him.

We've learned that the master unit, the unit that powers or controls all the collars in Camp Christian, is in my old cabin. For months it was kept in one of the maggots—or we heard that's where it was kept. We've had to put together hints, rumors, and overheard comments, any of which might be misinterpreted, or untrue. But at long last, I believe we have it right.

Reverend Locke's two assistants live in my cabin, and from time to time, some of us are taken there for the night. The next time that happens, we'll make our break.

The women who have been taken there most often are Noriko, Cristina Cho, and the Mora girls.

"They say they like small, ladylike women," Noriko says with terrible bitterness. "Those flabby, ugly men. They like us because it's easy for them to hurt us. They like to use

their hands, leave bruises, make you beg them to stop."

She, Cristina, and the Moras all say they would rather risk death than go on with things as they are. Whichever of them is taken to my cabin next will cut their rapists' throats during the night. They can do that now. I don't believe they could have a few months ago. Then they will try to find and disable the master unit. Problem is, we don't know what the master unit looks like. None of us has ever seen it.

All we know—or think we know about it—we've learned from those among us who have been collared before. They say once you disable the master unit, the smaller units won't work. The only way I can understand this is to compare it to one of the phones in the Balter house down south in Robledo, so long ago. This was a big, old-fashioned dinosaur of a "cordless" phone. You had to plug the base unit into an electrical outlet and a phone jack. Then you could walk around the house and yard talking into the hand unit. But unplug the two cords of the base, and the hand unit didn't work anymore. I'm told that that's close to what happens with a network of collars.

I don't know anything for sure. I only half believe that we can do what we think we can and survive. Tampering with the master unit might kill the woman who does it. It might kill us all. But the truth is, we couldn't last much longer, no matter what. We're only just human now—most of us. I've said this to the people I trust—people who have helped me gather the fragments of information that we have. I've asked each of them if they're willing to take the risk.

They are. We all are.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2035

Day before yesterday, we had a terrible storm—truly terrible. And yet, it was a wonderful thing: wind and rain and cold…and a landslide. The hill where our cemetery once was with all its new and old trees, that hill has slumped down into our valley. Our teachers had made us cut down the older trees for firewood and lumber and God. I never found out how they came to believe we prayed to trees, but they went on believing it. We begged them to let the hill alone, told them it was our cemetery, and they lashed us. Because they forced us to do this, the hillside has broken away and come rumbling down to us. It has buried a maggot and three cabins, including the cabin that Bankole and I had built and then lived in for our six brief years together.

Also, it buried the men who slept alone in that cabin. I'm sorry to say that there were two women in each of the other cabins. They were from squatter camps. Natividad had been friendly with one of them, but I didn't know them at all. They are dead, however, buried and dead. Six "teachers," four captive women, *and all of our collars* were dead. Last Sunday, we resolved to free ourselves or die trying. Now, instead, the weather, and our "teachers' " own stupidity has freed us.

Here is what happened.

The storm began as a cold rain whipped by a brisk wind on Monday afternoon, and for a while, we were made to go on working in it. At last, though, our "teachers," who are much more willing to inflict suffering than to endure it, drove us back to our prison rooms to sit in the cold dimness while they went to our cabins, to warm fires, light, and food.

After a while, the lowest-ranking "teacher" brought Beth and Jessica Faircloth out with our disgusting dinner—a

lot of half-boiled, half-spoiled cabbage with potatoes.

We had put Allie where the Faircloths could not avoid seeing her, being confronted by her when they came in. She is a little better. I've looked after her as best I could. She walks like a bent old woman, talks in monosyllables, and does not always seem to understand when we speak to her. I don't believe she even remembers what the Faircloths did to her, but she seems to trust me. I told her to watch them—watch them every second.

She did.

The Faircloths trembled and stumbled over one another, putting down pots of awful food and backing out. We all stared at them in silence, but I suspect they saw only saw Allie.

After dinner, we rested as best we could, feeling cold, stiff, miserable, and damp on the bare wood floor wrapped in our filthy blankets. Some of us slept, but the storm grew much worse, shaking the building and making it creak. Rain beat against the window and blew roofing off cabins, limbs off trees, and trash from the dump that the teachers had made us create. We had had no dump before. We had a salvage heap and a compost heap. Neither was trash. We could not afford to be wasteful. Our teachers have made trash of our entire community.

Sometimes there was lightning and thunder, sometimes only heavy rain. It went on all night, tearing the world apart outside. Then sometime this morning before dawn, not long after I had managed to get to sleep, I was awakened by a terrible noise. It wasn't like thunder—wasn't like anything I'd ever heard. It was just this incredible rumbling, breaking, cracking noise.

I reacted without thinking. My place is near the window, and I jumped up and looked out. I leaned against

the sill and peered out into the darkness. A moment later there was a flare of lightning, and I saw rock and dirt where my cabin should have been. Rock and dirt.

It took me a moment to understand this. Then I realized that I was leaning against the windowsill, leaning halfway out the window. And I had not convulsed and fallen to the floor. No pain. None of that filthy, twisting agony that made us all slaves.

I touched my collar. It was still there, still capable of delivering the agony. But for some reason, it no longer cared that I leaned against the windowsill. In the dark room, I reached for Natividad. She slept on one side of me and Allie slept on the other. Natividad trusts me, and she knows how to be quiet.

"Freedom!" I whispered. "The collars are dead! They're dead!"

She let me lead her to the door between our quarters and the men's. We managed to get there, each of us waking people as we went, whispering to them, but not stepping on anyone, feeling our way. At the door, Natividad pulled back a little, then she let me lead her through. The door's never been locked. Collars were always enough to keep everyone away from it. But not this time.

No pain.

We woke the men—those who were still asleep. We couldn't see well enough to wake only the men we trusted. We woke them all. We couldn't do this with silent stealth. We were quiet, but they awoke in confusion and chaos. Some were already awake and confused and grabbing me, and realizing that I was a woman. I hit one who wouldn't let me go—a stranger from the road.

"Freedom!" I whispered into his face. "The collars are dead! We can get away!"

He let me go, and scrambled for the door. I went back and gathered the women. When I got them into the men's room, the men were already pouring out of the building. We followed them through the big outside doors. Travis and Natividad, Mike and Noriko, others of Earthseed, the Gamas, and the Sullivans somehow found one another. We all clustered together, male and female members of families greeting one another, crying, hugging. They had not been able even to touch one another through the eternity of our captivity. Seventeen months. Eternity.

I hugged Harry because neither of us had anyone left. Then he and I stood together watching the others, probably feeling the same mixture of relief and pain. Zahra was gone. Bankole was gone. And where were our children?

But there was no time for joy or grief.

"We've got to get into the cabins now," I said, all but herding them before me. "We've got to stop them from fixing the collars. We've got to get their guns before they know what's going on. They'll waste time trying to lash us. Groups of four or more to a cabin. Do it!"

We all know how to work together. We've spent years working together. We separated and went to the houses. Travis, Natividad, and I grabbed the Mora girls and we burst into what had been the Kardos house just as the screaming began outside.

Some of our "teachers" came rushing out of their cabins to see what was wrong, and they were torn to pieces by the people they had so enjoyed tormenting.

Some of the captives, desperate to escape while they could, tried to find their way through the Lazor wire in the dark, and the wire cut their flesh to the bone when they ran into it.

Earthseed made no such lethal mistake. We went into

the cabins to arm ourselves, to rid ourselves of our "teachers," and to cut off our damned collars.

My group piled onto the two "teachers" who were there, out of bed, one with his pants and shirt on, and one in long underwear. They could have shot us. But they were so used to depending on their belts to protect them that it was the belts they tried to reach.

One stood and said, "What's going on?" The other lunged at Natividad and me with a wordless shout.

We grappled with them, dragged them down, and strangled them. That simple. Even simple for me. It hurt when they hit me. It hurt when I hit them. And it didn't matter a good goddamn! Once I had my hands on one of them, I just shut my eyes and did it. I never felt their deaths. And I have never been so eager and so glad to kill people.

We couldn't see them very well anyway in the dark cabin, but we made sure they were dead. We didn't let go of them until they were very, very dead. Our makeshift knives were still in the walls and floor of our barracks, but our hands did the job.

And then we had guns. We used a chair, then a night table to smash open a gun cabinet.

More important, then we had wire cutters.

Tori Mora found the cutters in what had once been Noriko Kardos's silverware drawer. Now it was full of small hand tools. We took turns cutting one another's collars off. As long as we wore them, we were in terrible danger. I was afraid every minute, anticipating the convulsing agony that could end our freedom, begin our final torture. Our "teachers" would kill us if they regained control of us. They would kill us very, very slowly. The collars alone would kill us if they somehow switched back on while we were trying

to cut through them and twist them off. I had learned over the months that nothing was more tamperproof than a functioning collar.

I cut the Mora girls' collar off, and Tori cut off mine. Travis and Natividad did the same for one another. And then we were free. Then, no matter what, we were truly free. We all hugged one another again. There was still danger, still work to do, but we were free. We allowed ourselves that moment of intense relief.

Then we went out to find that our people and some of the others had finished the job. The teachers were all dead. I saw that some of the inmates still wore their collars, so I went back into the Kardos cabin for the wire cutters. Once people realized what I was doing—cutting off collars—both outsiders and members of the Earthseed community made a ragged line in front of me. I spent the next several minutes cutting off collars. It was cold, the wind was blowing, but at least it had stopped raining. The eastern sky was beginning to brighten with the dawn. We were free people, all of us.

Now what?

We stripped what we could from the cabins. We had to. The outsiders were running around grabbing things, tearing or smashing whatever they didn't want, screaming, cheering, ripping curtains from windows, breaking windows, grabbing food and liquor. Amazing how much liquor our "teachers" had had.

We took guns first. We didn't try to stop the outsiders from their orgy of destruction, but we did guard the things we collected: guns, ammunition, clothing, shoes, food. Outsiders understood that. We were like them, taking what we wanted and guarding it. Some of them had found guns, too, but there was a respectful wariness between us. Even

people who got crazy drunk didn't come after us.

Someone shot the locks off the gate, and people began to leave.

Several people tried to shoot their way into the single unburied maggot, but it was locked and impervious to any effort we could make. In fact, if even one of our "teachers" had slept in the maggot, he could have defeated our escape. He could have killed us all.

Our own trucks were long gone. One had been destroyed when Gray Mora said his final "no" to slavery. The other had been taken and driven away. We had no idea where.

When it was light, I counted seven people dead on the Lazor wire. I suspect most had bled to death, although two had opened their own abdomens, even slicing into their intestines propelled by their mindless lunge for freedom. Lazor wire is impossible to see at night in the rain, and even the lowest street pauper should know the dangers of it. When we were ready to leave, I collected Allie, who had stayed inside the school and just stood at a window, staring out at us. I cut off her collar, then I thought about the Faircloths. I had not cut off their collars. They had not come to me. The two Faircloth boys, of course, had been taken away with the rest of our young children. Alan Faircloth, the father of Beth and Jessica, must have taken his daughters and slipped away—or perhaps the Sullivans had found them and taken their revenge.

I sighed. Either the girls were dead or they were with Alan. Best to say nothing. There had been enough killing.

I gathered what was left of the Earthseed community around me. The sun wasn't visible through the clouds, but the wind had died down, and the sky was pale gray. It was cold, but for once, with our fresh clothing, we were warm

enough.

"We can't stay here," I told my people. "We'll have to take as much as we can carry and go. The church will send people here sooner or later."

"Our homes," Noriko Kardos said in a kind of moan.

I nodded. "I know. But they're already gone. They've been gone for a long time." And a particular Earthseed verse occurred to me.

In order to rise
From its own ashes
A phoenix
First
Must
Burn.

It was an apt Earthseed verse, but not a comforting one. The problem with Earthseed has always been that it isn't a very comforting belief system.

"Let's take one last look through the houses," I said. "We need to look for evidence of what they've done with our children. That's the most important thing we can do next: find the children."

I left Michael and Travis to guard the goods we had collected, and the rest of us went in groups to search the ruins of the houses.

But we found nothing that related to the children. There was money hidden here and there around the cabins, missed by the marauding inmates. There were piles of religious tracts, Bibles, lists of "inmates" brought from Garberville, Eureka, Arcata, Trinidad, and other nearby towns. There was a plan for spring planting, a few books

written by President Jarret, or by some ghostwriter. There were personal papers, but nothing about our children, and no addresses. None. Nothing. This could only be deliberate. They feared being found out. Was it us they feared, or someone else?

We searched until almost midday. Then we knew we had to go, too. The roads were mud and water, and it was unlikely that anyone would try to drive up today, but we needed to get a good start. In particular, I wanted to go to our secret caches where we had not only the necessities but copies of records, journals, and in two places, the hand and foot prints of some of our children. Bankole took hand and foot prints of every child he delivered. He labeled them, gave a copy to the parents, and kept a copy. I had distributed these copies among two of our caches—the two that only a few of us knew about. I don't know whether the prints will help us get our children back. When I let myself think about it, I have to admit that I don't know even whether our children are alive. I only know that now I have to get to those two caches. They are back in the mountains toward the sea, not toward the road. We can disappear in that country. There are places there where we can shelter and decide what to do. It's one thing to say that we must find our children, and another to figure out how to do that, how to begin. Who to trust?

We burned Acorn. No. No, we burned Camp Christian. We burned Camp Christian so that it couldn't be used as Camp Christian anymore. If Christian America still wants the land it stole from us, it will have some serious rebuilding to do. We spread lamp oil and diesel fuel inside the cabins that we built from the trees we cut and the stone and concrete we hauled. We spread oil in the school Grayson Mora had

designed and we had all worked so hard to build and make beautiful. We spread it on the bodies of our “teachers.” All that we could not take with us, all that the other inmates had not taken or destroyed, we burned. The buildings might not burn to the ground because the rain had soaked everything, but they would be gutted and unsafe. The furniture that we had built or salvaged would burn. The hated flesh would burn.

So, once more, we watched our homes burn. We went into the hills, separating from the last of the other inmates, who went their own ways back to the highway or wherever else they might want to go. From the hills, for a time, we watched. Most of us had seen our homes burn before, but we had not been the ones to set the fires. This time, though, it’s too late for fire to be the destroyer that we remembered. The things that we had created and loved had already been destroyed. This time, the fires only cleansed.

FIFTEEN

From EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING

We have lived before.
We will live again.
We will be silk,
Stone,
Mind,
Star.
We will be scattered,
Gathered,
Molded,
Probed.
We will live
And we will serve life.
We will shape God
And God will shape us
Again,
Always again,
Forevermore.

THE CRUSADERS DELIBERATELY DIVIDED siblings because if they were together, they might support one another in secret heathen practices or beliefs. But if each child was isolated and dropped into a family of good Christian Americans, then each would be changed. Parent pressure, peer pressure, and time would remake them as good Christian Americans.

Sometimes it did, even among the older children of

Acorn. Look at the Faircloth boys. One became a Christian American minister. The other rejected Christian America completely. And sometimes the division was utterly destructive. Some of us died of it. Ramon Figueroa Castro committed suicide because, according to one of his foster brothers, "He was too stubborn to try to fit in and forget about his sinful past." Christian America was, at first, much more a refuge for the ignorant and the intolerant than it should have been. Even people who would never beat or burn another person could treat suddenly orphaned or abducted children with cold, self-righteous cruelty.

"Give in," my mother said to the adults of Acorn. "Do as you're told and keep your own council. Don't give them excuses to hurt you. Bide your time. Watch your captors. Listen to them. Collect information, pool it, and use it against them." But we kids never heard any of this. We were snatched away and given alone into the hands of people who believed that it was their duty to break us and remake us in the Christian American image. And, of course, breaking people is much easier than putting them together again.

So much agony caused, so much evil done in God's name.

And yet, Christian America had begun by trying to help and to heal as well as to convert. Long before Jarret was elected President, his church had begun to rescue children. But in those early days, they only rescued kids who really needed help. Along the Gulf Coast where Jarret began his work, there were several Christian American children's homes that were over a decade old by 2032. These homes collected street orphans, fed them, cared for them, and raised them to

be "the bulwark of Christian America." Only later did the fanatics take over and begin stealing the children of "heathens" and doing terrible harm.

In preparation for this book, I spoke with several people who were raised in "CA" children's homes or were adopted from CA homes into CA families. What they told me reminded me of my own life with the Alexanders. The homes and adoptive families were not meant to be cruel. Even in the homes, there were no collars except as punishment for the older children, and then only after warnings and lesser punishments had failed. The homes weren't kept by sadists or perverts but by people who believed deeply in what they were doing—or at least by workers who wanted very much to please their employers and keep their jobs. The believers wanted "their" children to believe absolutely in God, in Jarret and in being good Christian American soldiers ready to do battle with every sort of anti-American heathenism. The mercenaries were easier to please. They wanted no children injured or killed while they were on duty. They wanted the required lessons learned, the required tests passed. They wanted peace.

The Alexanders were like a combination of the believer and the mercenary. The Alexanders wanted me to believe, and if they did not love me, at least they took care of me. By the time I was old enough for school—Christian American school, of course—I had learned to be quiet and keep out of their way. When I succeeded at this, Kayce and Madison would reward me by letting me alone. Kayce took a break from telling me how much inferior I was to Kamaria. Madison took a break from trying to get his sweaty hands under my dress. I would take a book to a quiet corner of the

house or yard and read. My earliest books were all either Bible stories or stories of Christian American heroes who, like Asha Vere, did great deeds for the faith. These influenced me. How could they not? I dreamed of doing great deeds myself. I dreamed of making Kayce so proud of me, making her love me the way she loved Kamaria. Both my biological parents were big, strong people. Thanks to them, I was always big for my age, and strong—one more strike against me, since Kamaria had been "small and dainty." I dreamed of doing great, heroic things, but all I really tried to do was hide, vanish, make myself invisible.

It should have been hard for an oversized kid like me to hide that way, but it wasn't. If I did my chores and my homework, I was encouraged to vanish—or rather, I wasn't encouraged to do anything else. In my neighborhood there were only a few kids, and they were all older than I was. To them I was either a nuisance or a pawn. They ignored me or they got me into trouble. Kayce and her friends didn't appreciate any attempts I made to join in their adult conversation. Even when Kayce was alone, she wasn't really interested in anything I had to say. She either told me more than I wanted to know about Kamaria, or she punished me for asking questions about anything else.

Quiet was good. Questioning was bad. Children should be seen and not heard. They should believe what their elders told them, and be content that it was all they needed to know. If there were any brutality in the way I was raised, that was it. Stupid faith was good. Thinking and questioning were bad. I was to be like a sheep in Christ's flock—or Jarret's flock. I was to be quiet and meek. Once I learned that, my childhood was

at least physically comfortable.

FROM *The Journals of Lauren Oya Olamina*
SUNDAY, MARCH 4, 2035

So much has happened….

No, that's wrong. Things haven't just happened. I've caused them to happen. I must get back to normal, to knowing and admitting, at least to myself, when I cause things. Slaves are always told that they've caused something bad, done something sinful, made stupid mistakes. Good things were the acts of our "teachers" or of God. Bad things were our fault. Either we had done some specific wrong or God was so generally displeased with us that He was punishing the whole camp.

If you hear nonsense like that often enough for long enough, you begin to believe it. You weight yourself down with blame for all the world's pain. Or you decide that you're an innocent victim. Your masters are at fault or God is or Satan is—or maybe things just happen on their own. Slaves protect themselves in all sorts of ways.

But we're not slaves anymore.

I've done this: I sent my people away. We survived slavery together, but I didn't believe that we could survive freedom together. I broke up the Earthseed community and sent its parts in all directions. I believe it was the right thing to do, but I can hardly bear to think about it. Once I've written this, perhaps I can begin to heal. I don't know. All I know now is that I've torn a huge hole in myself. I've sent away those who mean most to me. They were all I had left, and I know I may not see them ever again.

On Tuesday we escaped from Camp Christian, burning the camp and our keepers as we went. We left behind the bones of our dead and the dream of Acorn as the first Earthseed community. The Sullivans and the Gamas went their own ways. We would not have asked them to leave us, but I was glad they did. We had between us only the money in our caches and the money we had taken from our "teachers." Since we are all now homeless, jobless, and on foot, that money won't go far.

I did ask both families who were going to stay with relatives or friends to get whatever information they could about the children, about the legality of the camp, about the existence of other camps. We all must find out what we can. I've asked them to leave word with the Holly family. The Hollys were neighbors, more distant than the Sullivans and the Gamas, but neighbors. They were good friends of the Sullivans, and there was no rumor of their having been enslaved. We must be careful not to get them into trouble, but if we are careful, and if we check with them now and then, we can all exchange information.

Problem is, we didn't dare take any of the phones from Camp Christian. The outsiders took some of them, but we were afraid we could somehow be traced if we used them. We can't take the chance of being collared again. We might be enslaved for life or executed because we've killed good Christian American citizens. The fact that those citizens had stolen our homes, our land, our freedom, and our children just might be overlooked if the citizens were influential enough. We believe it could happen. Look what had already happened! We're all afraid.

Among ourselves—Earthseed only—we've agreed on a place that we can use as a message drop. It's down near what's left of Humboldt Redwoods State Park. There any of

us can leave information to be read, copied, and acted on by the rest of us. It's a good place because we all know where it is and because it's isolated. Getting to it isn't easy. We don't dare leave information or meet in groups in some more convenient place near the highway or near local roads, and we need a way of reaching one another without depending on the Hollys. We'll check with them, but who knows how they'll feel about us now. We'll communicate among ourselves by leaving messages at our secret place, and perhaps by meeting there.

But I'm going too fast. We had some time together after leaving Camp Christian.

We walked deeper into the mountains, away from paved roads, south and west to the largest of our caches where we knew there was the cold shelter of a small cave. At the cave, we rested and shared the food that we had brought from Camp Christian. Then we dug out the supplies that we had stored in heavy, heat-sealed plastic sacks and stored there. That gave us all packets of dried foods—fruit, nuts, beans, eggs, and milk—plus blankets and ammunition. Most important, I passed out the infant foot and hand prints that had been stored at this particular cache to the parents present. I gave the Mora girls their younger brothers' prints and they sat staring at them, each holding one. Both their parents were dead. They have only each other and their little brothers, if they can find them.

"They should be with us!" Doe muttered. "No one has the right to take them from us."

Adela Ortiz folded her son's prints and put them inside her shirt. Then she folded her arms in front of her as though cradling a baby. Larkin's prints and those of Travis and Natividad's kids were at a different location, but I found the prints of Harry's kids, Tabia and Russell, and I gave them to

Harry. He just sat looking at them, frowning at them and shaking his head. It was as though he were trying to read an explanation in them for all that had happened to him. Or maybe he was seeing the faces of his children, and Zahra's face, long gone.

We sat warming ourselves around the fire we had finally dared to start. We had collected wood outside during the last hour of daylight, but we waited until it was dark to try to use it. The wood was wet and wouldn't burn at first. When we did get a small fire going, it seemed to make more smoke than heat. We hoped no one would see the smoke sliding up and out of the cave, or that if people did see it, they would think it was from one of the many squatter camps in the mountains. In winter, these mountains are cold, wet, uncomfortable places, difficult places in which to live without modern conveniences, but they're also places where sensible people mind their own business.

I sat with Harry and he went on staring at the prints and shaking his head. Then he began to rock back and forth. His expression in the firelight seemed to crack, to break down, somehow, unable to hold itself together.

I pulled him to me and held him while he cursed and cried in a harsh, strained, whisper. I realized at some point that I was crying too. I think that within ourselves, we both howled, but somehow, we never got much above a whisper, a rasp. I could feel the howling straining to get out of my throat, the screams that came out as small, ragged cries, his and mine. I don't know how long we sat together, holding one another, going mad inside ourselves, wailing and moaning for the dead and the lost, unable to contain for one more minute 17 months of humiliation and pain.

We wept ourselves to sleep like tired children. The next day Natividad told me she and Travis had done much the

same thing. The others, alone or in groups, had found their own comfort in cathartic weeping, deep sleep, or frantic, furtive love-making at the back of the cave. We were together at last, comforting one another, and yet I think each of us was alone, straining toward the others, some part of ourselves still trapped back in the uncertainty and fear, the pain and desolation of Camp Christian. We strained toward some kind of release, some human contact, some way into the normal, human grieving that had been denied us for so long. It amazes me that we were able to behave as sanely as we did.

The next morning Lucio Figueroa and Adela Ortiz awoke tangled together at the back of the cave. They stared at one another first in horror and confusion, then in deep embarrassment, then in resignation. He put his arm around her, pulled one of the blankets we had salvaged around her, and she leaned against him.

Jorge Cho and Diamond Scott awoke in a similar tangle, although they seemed both unsurprised and unembarrassed.

Michael and Noriko awoke together and lay still against one another for a long time, saying nothing, doing nothing. It seemed enough for each of them that at last they could wake up in each other's arms.

The Mora girls awoke together, their faces still marked with the tears they had shed the night before.

Somehow Aubrey Dovetree and Nina Noyer had found one another during the night, although they had never paid much attention to one another before. Once they were awake, they moved apart in obvious discomfort.

Only Allie awoke alone, huddled in fetal position in her blanket. I had forgotten her. And hadn't she lost even more than the rest of us?

I put her between Harry and me, and we started a breakfast fire with the wood we had left over from the night. We put together a breakfast of odds and ends, and Harry and I made her eat. I borrowed a comb from Diamond Scott, who had, in her neatness, managed to find one before we left Camp Christian. With it I combed Allie's hair, then my own. Things like that had begun to matter again, somehow. We all began to try to put ourselves together as respectable human beings again. For so long we had been filthy slaves in filthy rags cultivating filthy habits in the hope of avoiding rape or lashing. I found myself longing for a deep tub of hot, clean water. Thanks to our "teachers," filth and degradation had become so ordinary that sometimes we forgot that we were in rags and that we stank. In our exhaustion, fear, and pain, we came to treasure those moments when we could just lie down and forget, when no one was hurting us, when we had something to eat. Such animal comforts were all we could afford. Remembering wasn't safe. You could lose your mind, remembering.

My ancestors in this hemisphere were, by law, chattel slaves. In the U.S., they were chattel slaves for two and a half centuries—at least 10 generations. I used to think I knew what that meant. Now I realize that I can't begin to imagine the many terrible things that it must have done to them. How did they survive it all and keep their humanity? Certainly, they were never intended to keep it, just as we weren't.

"Today or tomorrow, we must separate," I said. "We must leave here in small groups." Breakfast was over, and we had all made ourselves a little more presentable. I could see that the others had begun to look at one another, begun to

wonder what to do next. I knew what we had to do. I had known almost from the time we were collared that even if we managed to free ourselves, we wouldn't be able to stay together.

"Earthseed continues," I said into the silence, "but Acorn is dead. There are too many of us. We would be too easy to spot, too easy to recapture or kill."

"What can we do?" Aubrey Dovetree demanded.

And Harry Balter said in a dead voice, "We've got to split up. We've got to go our separate ways and find our kids."

"No," Nina Noyer whispered, and then louder, "No! Everybody's gone, and now you want me to go away by myself again? No!" Now it was a shout.

"Yes," I said to her, only to her, my voice as soft as I could make it. "Nina, you come with me. My family is gone too. Come with me. We'll look for your sisters and my daughter and Allie's son."

"I want us all to stay together," she whispered, and she began to cry.

"If we stay together, we'll be collared or dead in no time," Harry said. He looked at me. "I'll go with you too. You'll need help. And…I want my kids back. I'm scared to death of what might be happening to them. That's all I can think about now. That's all I care about."

And Allie put her hand on his shoulder, trying to give comfort.

"No one should leave alone," I said. It's too dangerous to be alone. But don't gather into groups of more than five or six."

"What about us?" Doe Mora said, holding her sister's hand. It was hard at that moment to remember that the two were not blood relatives. Two lonely, frightened ex-slaves

met and loved one another and married, and their daughters Doe and Tori became sisters. And they're sisters now, orphaned and alone. I envy their closeness, and I fear for them. They're still kids, and they were abused almost past bearing at Camp Christian. They look starved and haunted. In a way that I can't quite describe, they look old. Our "teachers" realized that they were sharers back during Day's rebellion, and abused them all the more for it, but the girls never gave any of the rest of us away. Yet in spite of their courage, it would be so easy for them to wind up with new collars around their necks. Or they could wind up deciding to prostitute themselves—just to eat.

"You come with us," Natividad said. "We intend to find our children. If we can, we'll find your brothers as well."

Doe bit her lips. "I'm pregnant," she said. "Tori isn't, but I am."

"It's a wonder we all aren't," I said. "We were slaves. Now we're free." I looked at her. She's a tall, slender, delicate-looking girl, large-eyed like her namesake. "What do you want to do, Doe?"

Doe swallowed. "I don't know."

"We'll take care of her," Travis said. "Whatever she decides to do, we'll help her. Her father was a good man. He was a friend of mine. We'll take care of her."

I nodded, relieved. Travis and Natividad are two of the most competent, dependable people I know. They'll survive, and if the girls are with them, the girls will survive too.

Others began forming themselves into groups. Adela Ortiz, who first thought that she would join Travis, Natividad, and the Moras, decided in the end to stay with Lucio Figueroa and his sister. I'm not sure how she and Lucio wound up in each other's arms the night before, but I think now that Adela may be looking for a permanent

relationship with Lucio. He's much older than she is, and I think she hopes he'll want her and want to take care of her. But Adela is pregnant too. She's not showing yet, but according to what she's told me, she believes she's at least two months pregnant.

Also, Lucio is still carrying Teresa Lin around with him. Her death and the way she died has made him very, very quiet—kind, but distant. He wasn't like that back in Acorn. His own wife and children were killed before he met us. He had invested all his time and energy in helping his sister with her children. He had only begun to reach out again when Teresa joined us. Now…now perhaps he's decided that it hurts too much to begin to care for someone, then lose her.

It does hurt. It's terrible. I know that. But I know Adela, too. She needs to be needed. I remember she hated being pregnant the first time, hated the men who had gang-raped her. But she loved taking care of her baby. She was an attentive, loving mother, and she was happy. What's in store for her now, I don't know.

And yet in spite of my fears for my friends, my people, in spite of my longing to hold together a community that must divide, all this was easier than I had thought it would be—easier than I thought it *could* be. We'd all worked so well together for six years, and we'd endured so much as slaves. Now we were dividing ourselves, deciding how to go our separate ways. I don't mean that it was easy—just that it wasn't as hard as I expected. God is Change. I've taught that for six years. It's true, and I suppose it's paved the way for us now. Earthseed prepares you to live in the world that is and try to shape the world that you want. But none of it is really easy.

We spent the rest of the day going around to the other

caches and parceling out the supplies we'd left in them and gathering the other sets of children's hand and foot prints. Then we had one more night together. Once we had gone to all the caches—one had been raided, but the rest were intact—we spent the night in another shallow cave. It was raining again, and cold. That was good because it would make tracking us pretty much impossible. On that last night, when we'd eaten, we dropped off quickly to sleep. We'd been tramping through the mountains all day, carrying packs that got heavier with each stop, and we were tired. But the next morning before we parted, we held a final Gathering. We sang Earthseed verses, to the tunes that Gray Mora and Travis had written. We Remembered our dead, including our dead Acorn. Each of us spoke of it, Remembering.

"You are Earthseed," I said to them, at last. "You always will be. I love you. I love you all." I stopped for a moment, struggling to hold on to what was left of my self-control.

Somehow, I went on. "Not everyone in this country stands with Andrew Jarret," I said. "We know that. Jarret will pass, and we will still be here. We know more about survival than most people. The proof is that we have survived. We have tools that other people don't have, and that they need. The time will come again when we can share what we know." I paused, swallowed. "Stay well," I told them. "Take care of one another."

We agreed to visit the newly designated Humboldt Redwoods information drop every month or two for a year—at least that long. We agreed that it was best that each group not know yet where the other groups were going—so that if one group was caught, it couldn't be forced to betray the others. We agreed it was best not to live in the Eureka

and Arcata area because that's where most of our jailers lived, both the dead ones and the off-shift ones who were still alive. Each city was home to a big Christian American church and several affiliated organizations. We might have to go to these cities to look for our children, but once we've found them and taken them back, we should go elsewhere to live.

"And change your names," I told them. "As soon as you can, buy yourselves new identities. Then relax. You're honest people. If anyone says otherwise, attack their credibility. Accuse them of being secret cultists, witches, Satanists, thieves. Whatever you think will endanger your accusers the most, say it! Don't just defend yourselves. Attack. And keep attacking until you scare the shit out of your accusers. Watch them. Pay attention to their body language. Their own reactions will tell you how best to damage them or scare them off.

"I don't think you'll have to do much of that kind of thing. The chances of any of us running into someone who knew us at Camp Christian are small. It's just that we need to be mentally prepared for it if it happens. God is Change. Look after yourselves."

And we went our separate ways. Travis said we would be better off not walking on the highway unless we could lose ourselves in a crowd. If there were no crowds, he said, we should walk through the hills. It would be harder, but safer. I agreed.

We hugged one another. It took a lot of hugging. It took the possibility of coming together again someday in another state or another country or a post-Jarret America. It took tears and fear and hope. It was terrible, that final leavetaking. Deciding to do it was easier than I thought.

Doing it was much harder. It was the hardest thing I've ever had to do.

Then I was alone with Allie, Harry, and Nina. We four slogged through the mud, heading north. We traveled through the familiar hills, to the outskirts of Eureka, and finally, to Georgetown. I was the one who suggested Georgetown once we had separated from the others.

"Why?" Harry demanded in a cold voice that didn't sound much like Harry.

"Because it's a good place to pick up information," I said. "And because I know Dolores Ramos George. She may not be able to help us, but she won't talk about our being there."

Harry nodded.

"What's Georgetown?" Nina asked.

"A squatter settlement," I told her. "A big, nasty one. We went there when we were looking for you and your sister. You can get lost in there. People aren't nosy, and the Georges are all right."

"They're all right." Allie agreed. "They don't turn people in." These were her first voluntary sentences since her lashing. I looked at her, and she repeated, "They're all right. We can look for Justin from Georgetown."

SIXTEEN

From EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING

The Destiny of Earthseed
Is to take root among the stars.

It is to live and to thrive
On new earths.

It is to become new beings
And to consider new questions.

It is to leap into the heavens
Again and again.

It is to explore the vastness
Of heaven.

It is to explore the vastness
Of ourselves.

MY FIRST CLEAR MEMORY is of a doll. I was about three years old, maybe four. I don't know where the doll came from. I still don't know. I had never seen one before. I had never been told that they were sinful or forbidden or even that they existed. I suspect now that this doll had been thrown over our fence and abandoned. I found it at the foot of the big pine tree

that grew in our backyard.

The doll had been made in the image of an adolescent blond-haired blue-eyed girl. I remember that it was very straight and thin. It was dressed in a scrap of pink cloth. I remember feeling the knot in the back of it where three ends of the scrap were tied over one shoulder and around the waist. The knot was an oddly soft lump against the hard plastic of the doll's body, and as soon as my fingers found it, I began to pick at it. Then I chewed on it. Then I examined the coarse, yellow hair. It looked like hair, but when I touched it, it didn't feel right. And it bothered me that the legs didn't move. They just stuck out stiff, the feet shaped in permanent tiptoes. I didn't know how to play with a doll, but I knew how to look at it, feel it, taste it, file it away in my memory as one of the new, strange things to come into my world.

Then Kayce was there, snatching the doll from me. When I reached for it, wanting it back, she slapped me. She had come up behind me, seen what was in my hands, and in her sudden rage, lost control. She was a stern disciplinarian, but she rarely hit me. To give her her due, this was the only time I remember her just lashing out at me that way in anger. Maybe that's why I remember it so well.

A man who grew up at the Pelican Bay Christian American Children's Home told me about a Matron who went into a similar rage and killed a child.

Her victim was a seven-year-old boy who had Tourette's syndrome. My informant said, "We kids didn't know anything about Tourette's syndrome, but we knew this particular kid couldn't help yelling insults and making noises. He didn't mean it. Some of us didn't

like him. Some of us thought he was crazy. But we all knew he didn't mean the things he yelled out. We knew he couldn't help it. But Matron said he had a devil in him, and she was always screaming at him—every day.

"Then one day she hit him, knocked him into the edge of a kitchen cabinet. He hit the cabinet with his head, and he died.

"I don't believe Matron was sentenced and collared, but she was fired. I just hope that she couldn't find another professional job and had to indenture herself. One way or another, a person like her should wind up wearing a collar."

There was a mindless rigidity about some Christian Americans—about the ones who did the most harm. They were so certain that they were right that, like medieval inquisitors, they would kill you, even torture you to death, to save your soul. Kayce wasn't that bad, but she was more rigid and literal-minded than any human being with normal intelligence should have been, and I suffered for it.

Anyway, she snatched the doll from me and began slapping my face. All the while, she was shouting at me. I was so scared, and screaming so loud myself that I didn't know what she was saying. Looking back now, I know it must have been something to do with idolatry, heathenism, or graven images. Christian America had created whole new categories of sin and expanded old ones. We were not permitted pictures of any kind. Movies and television were forbidden, but somehow Dreamasks were not—although only religious topics were permitted. Later, when I was in school, older kids would pass around secular masks that offered stories of adventure, war, and sex. I had my first pleasurable

sexual experience, wearing a deliberately mislabeled Dreamask. The label said "The Story of Moses." In fact, it was the story of a girl who had wild sex with her pastor, the deacons, and anyone else she could seduce. I was eleven years old when I discovered that Mask. If Kayce had ever known what it was, she might have done more than just slap my face. I kept the dirty Mask well hidden.

But at three, I hadn't known enough to hide the doll. Only Kayce's reaction told me what a terrible thing it was. She made me watch while she dug a hole in our backyard, put the doll in, covered it with cooking oil and old papers, and burned it. This, she said, was what would happen to me if I went on defying God and working for Satan. I would go down to hell, and what she had done to the doll, the devil would do to me. I remember she made me look at the shapeless blackened plastic lump that the doll had become. She made me hold it, and I cried because it was still hot, and it burned my hand.

"If you think that hurts," she said, "you just wait until you get to hell."

Years later, when I was a grown woman, the small daughter of a friend showed me her doll. I managed to stand up quickly and get out of the house. I didn't scream or thrust the doll away. I just ran. I panicked at the sight of a little girl's doll—real panic. I had to think and remember for a long time before I understood why.

The purpose of Christian America was to make America the great, Christian country that it was supposed to be, to prepare it for a future of strength, stability, and world leadership, and to prepare its people for life everlasting in heaven. Yet sometimes

now when I think about Christian America and all that it did when it held power over so many lives, I don't think about order and stability or greatness or even places like Camp Christian or Pelican Bay. I think about the other extremes, the many small, sad, silly extremes that made up so much of Christian American life. I think about a little girl's doll and I try to banish the shadows of panic that I still can't help feeling when I see one.

FROM *The Journals of Lauren Oya Olamina*
WEDNESDAY, MARCH 28, 2035

We have found Justin Gilchrist—or rather, he has found us. In the weeks we've been at Georgetown, this is the best thing that's happened to us.

We've been working for the Georges for room and board while we regained our health, tried to find out where our children might be, caught up on the news, and tried to find ways of fitting ourselves into the world as it is now. Because we've worked for our keep, we still have most of the money we arrived with. I've even managed to earn a little more by reading and writing for people. Most people in Georgetown are illiterate. I've begun to teach reading and writing to some of the few who want to learn. That's also bringing in a little hard currency. And I sell pencil sketches of people's children or other loved ones. This last, I must be careful about. It seems that some of the more rabid Christian America types have decided that a picture of your child might be seen as a graven image. That seems too extreme to catch on with most people even though Jarret is much loved in Georgetown. Many people here have sons,

brothers, husbands, or other male relatives who have been injured or killed in the Al-Can War, but still, they love Jarret.

In fact, Jarret is both loved and despised here. The religious poor who are ignorant, frightened, and desperate to improve their situations are glad to see a “man of God” in the White House. And that’s what he is to them: a man of God.

Even some of the less religious ones support him. They say the country needs a strong hand to bring back order, good jobs, honest cops, and free schools. They say he has to be given plenty of time and a free hand so he can put things right again.

But those dedicated to other religions, and those who are not religious at all sneer at Jarret and call him a hypocrite. They sneer, they hate him, but they also fear him. They see him for the tyrant that he is. And the thugs see him as one of them. They envy him. He is the bigger, the more successful thief, murderer, and slaver.

The working poor who love Jarret want to be fooled, need to be fooled. They scratch a living, working long, hard hours at dangerous, dirty jobs, and they need a savior. Poor women, in particular, tend to be deeply religious and more than willing to see Jarret as the Second Coming. Religion is all they have. Their employers and their men abuse them. They bear more children than they can feed. They bear everyone’s contempt.

And yet, whether or not extreme Jarretites say it is a sin, they want pictures of their little ones. And I charge less than local photographers. I’m kinder than photographers too. I’ve never drawn a child’s dirt or its sores, or its rags. That isn’t necessary. I’ve made older plain boys handsome and plain girls pretty for their lovers or for their parents.

I've even managed after many tries to draw the dead, guided by the loving memory of a relative or friend. I don't know how accurate these drawings are, of course, but they please people.

I think I'll be able to earn a living sketching, teaching, reading, and writing for people as long as I stick to squatter settlements and the poor sections of towns. And there is a bonus to my becoming acquainted with the people in these places. Many of the people in the squatter settlements work in the yards and homes of somewhat-better-off people in the towns and cities. The squatters do gardening, housecleaning, painting, carpentry, childcare, even some plumbing and electrical work. They serve people who have houses or apartments to live in but can't afford to support even unsalaried live-in servants. Such people pay small sums of money or provide food or clothing to get their work done. Squatters who do this kind of work get a chance to see and hear any number of useful things. If, for instance, new children have appeared at an employer's home or at a home nearby, regular day laborers know of it. And if the price is right, they'll tell what they know. Information is as much for sale here as is anything else.

In spite of my efforts, though, we found Justin not by buying information, but because he escaped from his new family and came looking for us. He's 11 years old now—old enough to decide for himself what's true and what isn't and too old to be told that the woman he's called mother for eight of his 11 years was evil and worshiped the devil.

I had just finished a pen-and-ink sketch of a woman and her two youngest kids, sitting outside their wood-and-plastic shack. I was headed back up to my room at the hotel. The streets in Georgetown are all dirt tracks or trash-filled

ditches—open sewers—where you might step in anything. The Georges were sensible enough to build their collection of businesses upslope from the worst of the mess, but I can only do my work by going down to where most of the people are. I haven't bought much since I've been here, but I have invested in a pair of well-made, water-resistant boots.

I was thinking, as I walked, about the woman whom I had just drawn with her three-month-old and her 18-month-old. The mother isn't 30 yet, but she looks fifty. She has nine kids, sparse, graying hair, and almost no teeth. I felt as though I had gone back in time. Farther back, I mean. We were nineteenth-century in Acorn. What is this, I wondered? Eighteenth? And yet, perversely, I found myself filled with envy.

Sometimes I look at these poor, sad women and I'm almost sick with envy. *At least they have their children.* If they have nothing else, they have their children. I look at the children and I draw them, and I can hardly stand it.

As I tramped up the hill toward my room at George's, I saw a little boy squatting by the side of the path, his head in his hands. He was just another scrawny little kid in rags. I thought he might be having a nosebleed, and that made me want to hurry past him. My sharing makes me a coward sometimes. But it also makes me resist being a coward.

I stopped. "Are you all right, honey?" I asked.

He jumped at the sound of my voice, then stared up at me. He was not bleeding, but his lips were cut and swollen and he had an old slash in his cheek and a big black-and-blue swelling on the left side of his forehead. I froze the way I had learned to freeze when confronted with unexpected pain, and the kid mumbled something that I didn't understand because his mouth was so swollen. Then he just

launched himself at me.

I thought at first that it was some kind of attack. I thought he might have a knife or an old-style razor or even a skin patch of some poison or a drug. There's nothing new about thieving or murderous children. In a big squatter settlement like Georgetown, there were quite a few of them, although they tended to go after the small, the weak, or the sick. And they tended to travel in packs. Then somehow, before the boy touched me, I knew him. I recognized his wounded, distorted face in spite of the pain he was giving me.

Justin! Justin beaten and cut, but alive. I held him, ignoring the people around us who stared or muttered. Justin is small and wiry. I suspect he still has quite a bit of growing to do. He's White, red-haired, and freckled. In short, he doesn't look like someone who should be hugging me. But in Georgetown although people might stare, they don't interfere. They mind their own business. They don't need anyone else's trouble.

I held him away from me and looked him over. He was filthy and bloody, and he didn't look as though he had had much to eat recently. The cuts on his face and mouth and his bruised head weren't his only injuries. He moved as though he hurt elsewhere.

"Is Mama here, too?" he asked.

"She's here," I said.

"Where?"

"I'm taking you to her." We had begun to walk together up toward the George complex.

"Is the Doctor there too?"

I stopped, staring up toward the complex, and looked down, waiting until I could keep my voice steady. "No, Jus. He's not here."

The Justin I had known back before Camp Christian would have accepted these words at face value. He might have asked where Bankole was, but he wouldn't have said what this much older, wounded, wiser child said.

"Shaper?"

I hadn't heard that title for a while. In fact, I hadn't heard my name for a while. In Georgetown, I called myself Cory Duran. It was my stepmother's maiden name, and I used it in the hope of attracting my brother's attention if he happened to be around. The false name is accepted here because even though I'd been to Georgetown several times before the destruction of Acorn, among the permanent residents, only Dolores George and her husband knew my name. And the Georges don't gossip.

As for the title, in Acorn, all the children called me "Shaper." It was the title that seemed right for one teaching Earthseed. Travis, too, was called Shaper. So was Natividad.

"Shaper?"

"Yes, Jus."

"Is the Doctor dead?"

"Yes. He's dead."

"Oh." He had begun to cry. He had not been crying over his own injuries, but he cried for my Bankole. I took his hand and we walked up the hill to George's.

Like the rest of us, Allie has been working for Dolores George. I never worried about my own ability to earn my way. I worried about Harry's depression, but not about his resourcefulness. He would have little trouble. Nina Noyer didn't give me time to worry about her. She arrived at Georgetown and almost immediately fell in love with one of the younger George sons. In spite of her two lost sisters, in spite of Dolores George's disapproval, Nina and the boy are so intense, so wrapped up in one another that Dolores

knows she could only alienate her son by objecting. She hopes the sudden passion will burn itself out. I'm not so sure.

But I worried about Allie. She is healing. She talks now as much as she ever did—which is to say, not a lot. She can think and reason. But not all of her memory has come back. For that reason, I told Dolores some of her story and hoped aloud that some permanent job could be found for her. Dolores first gave her small jobs to do, cleaning floors, repairing steps, painting railings….When she saw that Allie worked well and made no trouble, she said Allie could stay as long as she wanted to. No salary, just room and board.

I stopped at a tree stump about halfway up the hill and sat down and took both of Justin's hands between mine. His face looked bad, and it was hard to look at him, but I made myself do it. "Jus, they hurt your mother."

He began to look afraid. "Hurt her how?"

"They put a collar on her. They put collars on all of us. They hurt her with the collar. I don't know whether you've ever seen—"

"I have. I saw collar gangs working on the highway and in Eureka, fixing potholes, pulling weeds, stuff like that. I saw how a collar can hurt you and make you fall down and twitch and scream."

I nodded. "Collars can do more than that. Someone got really mad at your mother and used the collar to hurt her badly. She's almost okay now, but she's still having some trouble with her memory."

"Amnesia?"

"Yes. Most of what she's lost is what happened in the weeks and months just before she was hurt. That was a bad time for us all, and it may be a mercy that she's lost it. But don't be surprised if you ask her about something and she

doesn't remember. She can't help it."

He thought about that for a while, then asked in almost a whisper, "Will she remember me?"

"Absolutely. We've been in contact with all sorts of people trying to find out where you and the others were." Then I couldn't help myself. I had to ask a few questions for myself. "Justin, were you with any of the other kids? Were you with Larkin?"

He shook his head. "They took us all to Arcata to the church there. Then they made us all separate. They said we were going to have new Christian American families. They said…they said you were all dead. I believed them at first, and I didn't know what to do. But then I saw how they would lie whenever they felt like it. They would say things about us and about Acorn that were nothing but lies. Then I didn't know what to believe."

"Do you know where they sent Larkin—or any of the others?"

He shook his head again. "They made me go with some people who had a girl and a boy of their own. I was almost the first one to go. I didn't get to see who got the other kids. I guess they went with other families. The people who got me, the man was a deacon. He said it was his duty to take me. I guess it was his duty to beat me up, too!"

"Did he do this to your face?"

Justin nodded. "He did and his son—Carl. Carl said my mother was a devil worshiper and a witch. He was always saying that. He's 12, and he thinks he knows everything. Then a few days ago, he said she was a…a whore. And I hit him. We got into a big fight and his father came out and called me an ungrateful little devil-worshiping bastard. Then they both beat the hell out of me. They locked up me in my room and I went out the window. Then I didn't know

where to go, so I just went south, out of town, down toward Acorn. The deacon had said it wasn't there anymore, but I had to see for myself. Then a woman saw me on the road and she brought me here. She gave me some food and put some medicine on my face. She had a lot of kids, but she let me stay with her for a couple of days. I guess she would have let me live there. But I wanted to go home."

I listened to all this, then sighed. "Acorn really is gone," I said. "When we finally broke free, we burned what was left of it."

"*You* burned it?"

"Yes. We couldn't stay there. We would have been caught and collared again or killed. So we took what we could carry, and we burned the rest. Why should they be able to steal it and use it? We burned it!"

He drew back from me a little, and I was afraid I was scaring him. He's a tough little kid, but he had been through a lot. I felt ashamed of letting my feelings show more than I should have.

Then he came close and whispered, "Did you kill them?" So I hadn't been scaring him. The look on his thin, battered face was intense and angry and far more full of hate than a child's face should have been.

I just nodded.

"The ones who hurt my mother—did you kill them, too?"

"Yes."

"Good!"

We got up, and I took him to Allie. I watched them meet, saw Allie's joyous tears, heard her cries. I could hardly stand it, but I watched.

Then Harry got an idea about where his kids might be. He

had gotten a job driving one of the George trucks or riding shotgun—something he had had plenty of experience doing back at Acorn. He was even able to make friends with the clannish George men. He would never be one of them, but they liked him, and once he'd proved himself by spotting and helping to prevent an attempted hijacking, they trusted him. This enabled him to see more of the state than he could have by just wandering on foot. But it also kept him on the job, with the trucks most of the time. He couldn't look for his children himself—couldn't walk through the little towns, looking at the children as they worked or played. Doing that would probably get him into trouble, anyway.

Justin had given us two sad, useful bits of information. First, all the kids' names were changed. Justin had been called Matthew Landis, just another of Deacon Landis's sons. The older kids like Justin would remember their real names and who their parents were, but the younger ones, the babies, my Larkin….

The second bit of information was that sibling groups were always broken up. This seemed an unnecessary bit of sadism, even for the Church of Christian America. Justin didn't know why it was done, hadn't seen it done, but he had heard Deacon Landis mention it to another man. So children who had already lost their homes and their parents or guardians had also had their sisters or brothers and their own names taken from them.

With all that, how will I find Larkin?

How will I ever find my child? I've asked all the day laborers I know to look for a Black girlchild, dark-skinned, not yet two years old, but probably big for her age, who has suddenly appeared in a household where there had been no pregnancy, in a household that might not be Black, or in a

foster home. I've pretended to be a day laborer myself and substituted for two of the cleaning women so that I could look at two children who had been reported to me as possible candidates. Neither was anything like Larkin.

But is Larkin anything like the Larkin I remember anymore? How can she be? Babies grow and change so fast. She was only two months old when they took her. I'm afraid I won't know her now. But I still have the hand and foot prints. I've made copies of them so that I can always carry one. I've even gone to the police—the Humboldt County Sheriff—with my false name and told them a false story of how my daughter had been stolen from me as I walked along the highway. I left them a copy of the hand and foot prints and paid the "fee for police services" that you have to pay for anything other than an immediate emergency. I don't know whether that was wise or useful, but I did it. I'm doing everything I can think of.

That's why I don't blame Harry for what he's done. I wish like hell he hadn't done it, but I don't blame him. When you're desperate, you do desperate things.

Harry came to see me two days ago.

He'd just returned from a three-day trip up into Oregon and then over to Tahoe and back. The usual thing for him to do after a trip like that should have been to eat something and go to bed.

Instead, he came to my room to see me. I was working at a small, rickety table I had bought. I had sketched a mother and her three children and made the table the price of the sketch. My tiny, closetlike room itself came with a window, a block of wood to wedge it open or bar it shut, a narrow shelfbed, a lot of dirt, and a few bugs. I had bought a pitcher and basin for quick washing, some soap, a chair and table for working, and a jug with the best available

water purifier for drinking water. And bug spray.

"Fancy," Dolores had said when she came to look at it. "Why the hell don't you spring for a decent room? You can afford it."

"When I find my daughter, maybe I'll be able to think about things like that," I said. "I don't know what it will cost me to find her, then maybe buy her. I don't know what I might have to do." And maybe, I did not say, maybe I'll have to kidnap her and run. Maybe I'll have to pay the Georges for a fast trip across one or two state lines. Maybe anything. I couldn't waste money.

"Yeah," she said. "I haven't heard anything more, but my people are listening."

They're still listening. So are the freelancers to whom I had paid a little and promised a lot—people like Cougar, I'm sorry to say—except that they deal in even younger children. I feel filthy every time I have to talk to one of them. If anyone deserves to be collared and put to work, they do, and yet there hasn't been any particular Christian American crackdown on them.

Apparently we represent the greater danger to Jarret's America. What was done to us was illegal, by the way. We've learned that much. No new laws have been made to okay any of it. But, as Day Turner said long ago, a lot of people are convinced that cracking down on the poor and the different is a good idea. There are now a number of legal cases—Hindus, Jews, Moslems, and others who have managed to avoid being caught when Crusaders came for them. But even among these people, young children who are taken away are not often returned. Charge after charge of neglect and abuse is made against the parents or guardians. In fact, the parents or guardians might wind up collared legally for the horrible things they were supposed

to have done to their children. Sometimes brainwashed or terrorized children are produced to give testimony against biological parents they haven't seen for months or years. I wasn't sure what to make of that last. Justin had not turned against Allie, no matter what he had been told about her. What kind of brainwashing would make a child turn against its own parents?

So the legal road seems not to lead to a return of abducted children—or it hasn't so far. It hasn't even led to an end of the camps. Camps are mentioned on the nets and disks as being strictly for the rehabilitation and reeducation of minor criminals—vagrants, thieves, addicts, and prostitutes. That's all. No problem.

We are, as we have always been, on our own.

"I quit my job today," Harry said to me. He sat on my bed and leaned forward on my table, looking across at me with disturbing intensity. "I'm leaving."

I put aside the lessons I had been writing for one of my students—a woman who wanted to learn to read so that she could teach her children. My students can't or won't afford books of any kind. I write lessons for them on sheets of paper that they buy from George's and bring to me. I've taught them to practice first letters, then words on the ground in a smooth patch of dirt. They write with their forefingers to learn to feel the shapes of letters and words. Then I make them write with sharp, slender sticks so they can get used to the feel of using a pencil or pen.

It seems I've always taught. With four younger brothers, I feel as though I were born teaching. I like doing it. I'm just not sure how much good it does. How much good does anything do now?

"What have you heard?" I asked Harry.

He stared off to one side, out my window.

I reached across the table to take his hand. “Tell me, Harry.”

He looked at me and tried, I think, to smile a little. “I’ve heard that there’s a big children’s home run by Christian America down in Marin County,” he said, “and there’s another in Ventura County. I don’t have addresses, but I’ll find them. Truth is, I’ve heard there are a lot of children’s homes run by CA. But those are the only two I know of in California.” He paused, looked out the window again. “I don’t know whether they would send our kids to one of those places. Justin says he didn’t hear anything about children’s homes or orphanages. He says all he heard was that he and the other kids were going to new families to be raised the right way as patriotic Christian Americans.”

“But you’re going down to Ventura and Marin to find out for sure?”

“I have to.”

I thought about this, then shook my head. “I don’t believe they’d send kids as young as yours and mine down there. They have them adopted or fostered around here somewhere. At worst they’d be here in small group homes. The Ventura home would have kids pouring into it from all of southern California. The Marin home would be full of kids from the Bay Area and Sacramento.”

“So you go on looking here,” he said. “I want you to. If you find our kids, it will be as good as if I found them. They won’t be in the hands of crazy people—of their own mother’s murderers.”

“*Here* is where it makes sense to look!” I said. “If CA is doing any moving of kids, chances are, it’s from south to north. It’s still crowded down there—with all the immigration from Latin America plus the people from Arizona and Nevada and those who were already there.”

“I’ve got to go,” he said. “I know you’re right, but it doesn’t matter. I don’t know where to look up here. Adoptions, foster homes, even small group homes don’t call enough attention to themselves. We’ve been checking them, one by one, and we could go on doing that for years. But if the kids are down south, I might be able to get a job at first one, then the other of the big homes and get a look at them.”

I sat back, thinking. “I believe you’re wrong,” I said. “But if you insist on
going—”

“I’m going.”

“You shouldn’t go alone. You need someone to watch your back.”

“I don’t want you with me. I want you here, searching.” He took two palm-sized debit phones from his jacket pocket and pushed one toward me. They were a cheap version of the prepaid renewable kind of satellite phone that we used to use at Acorn. “I bought these yesterday,” he said. “I paid for five hours of in-country use. They’re cheap, simple, and anonymous. All you can do with them is call and receive, voice only. No screen, no net access, no message storage. But at least we’ll be able to talk to one another.”

“But your chances of surviving alone on the road—”

He got up and walked toward the door.

“Harry!” I said, standing myself.

“I’m tired,” he said. “I’ve got to get some sleep. I’m half dead.”

I let him go. His depression was bad enough. Depression and exhaustion together were too much to fight against. He hadn’t been himself since Zahra’s death. I would let him rest, then try to make him see reason. I wouldn’t try to make him stay, but going alone was suicide. He knew it.

Once he had rested, he would be able to admit it.

But the next day—today—Harry was gone.

He left George's early this morning, buying a ride in a truck headed for Santa Barbara. I didn't know about it until I saw Dolores this morning. She handed me the note that he had left with her for me.

"I have to go, Lauren," it said. "Keep the phone with you and stay put. I'll come back. If I don't find the kids down south, I'll help you continue the search up here. Don't worry, and take care of yourself."

All his life, he's been a funny, gentle, bright person with an undercurrent of seriousness. We've known one another all our lives, and felt comfortable enough together to be brother and sister. He and Zahra were my best friends. I've lost count of the number of times we've saved one another's lives.

And now it's over. Truly over. Zahra is dead. Harry is gone. Everyone is gone. Allie meant to live in Georgetown with Justin. She had the one thing she cared about: her son. And Nina Noyer just wanted to get married and settle down with people who could take care of her and protect her. I don't blame her, but I find I don't like her much. Her little sisters might be wearing collars now or living with people who abused and terrorized them in God's name. Or they might be in some huge warehouse of a children's home, lost in the crowd, but separated from one another if Justin was right—lost to everyone who had ever loved them.

It isn't that Nina doesn't care. She just doesn't think she can do anything to help them. "I'm not Dan," she's told me more than once. "Maybe it means I'm weak, but I can't help it. I can't do what he did. I can't! It's not fair to expect me to. He was a boy—almost a man! I just want to get married and be happy!"

She’s 16. Her brother was only 15 when he rescued her and brought her to us. But as she says, she’s not him.

SEVENTEEN

From EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING

All prayers are to Self
And, in one way or another,
All prayers are answered.
Pray,
But beware.
Your desires,
Whether or not you achieve them
Will determine who you become.

I WONDER WHAT MY life would have been like if my mother had found me. I don't doubt that she would have stolen me from the Alexanders—or died trying. But then what? How long would it have been before she put me aside for Earthseed, her other kid? Earthseed was never long out of her thoughts. If it didn't comfort her during her captivity—and I suspect it did—at least it sustained her. It enabled her to survive without giving up or truly giving in to her captors. I couldn't have helped her. I was her weakness. Earthseed was her strength. No wonder it was her favorite.

FROM *The Journals of Lauren Oya Olamina*
SUNDAY, APRIL 8, 2035

I'm on my own.

I've left Georgetown, left my students old and young, left my room furnished with junk. I left some of my money and one of my guns with Allie so that I'll have something to fall back on if I'm robbed. I've come first to the message cache—two days' walk—to see whether anything has been left. I'm there now. I'll sleep there in the shelter of a living coast redwood tree that time and rot have hollowed out enough to hold a human or three. I've found unsigned messages from Travis and Natividad and from Michael and Noriko. Both identified themselves by referring to incidents that any member of the community would remember and understand but that would mean nothing to strangers. I did the same in the message I left.

Neither couple had found their kids. Both had left numbers. They had bought new phones—the cheap, talk-and-listen, debit phones like Harry's and mine. I left three numbers—mine, Harry's, and one where Allie could be reached. Then I wrote a message to those who might come later.

"Justin is with us again! He's all right. There is hope. God is Change!"

God is Change. I wrote the words, then settled back to think about that. I find that I haven't thought much about Earthseed in the past few months. I believe its teachings helped me, helped all of us to survive Camp Christian. God is Change. I've lost none of my belief. All that I said to Bankole so long ago—two years ago—is still true.

So much has been destroyed, but it is still true. Earthseed is true. The Destiny is as significant a human purpose as it ever was. Only Acorn is gone. Acorn was precious, but it wasn't essential.

I sit here now, trying to think, to plan. I must find my daughter, and I must teach Earthseed, make Earthseed real

to as many people as I can reach, and send them out to teach others.

The truth is, when I taught reading, I used a few simple Earthseed verses. This is what I did in Acorn, and I did it automatically in Georgetown. Strange to say, no one objected. People sometimes looked puzzled, sometimes disagreed or agreed with enthusiasm, but no one complained. Some people even seemed to think that what I read was from the Bible. I couldn't bring myself to let them go on thinking that.

"No," I told them. "It's from something else called *Earthseed: The Books of the Living.*" And I showed them one of the few surviving copies—retrieved from one of the caches. Since I've been calling myself Cory Duran, no one connected me with the strangely named author, Lauren Oya Olamina.

Lines like the familiar,

"All that you touch,
You Change…."

And

"To get along with God
Consider the consequences of your behavior."

And

"Belief
Initiates and guides action
Or it does nothing."

And

"Kindness eases Change."

People seemed to like brief fragments of verses or complete rhythmic verses because rhythmic verses are easy to memorize. And memorizing verses made it easier to spot individual words and learn to recognize them in their written forms. In that way, I guess I never stopped teaching Earthseed. But without the Destiny, without a more complete understanding of the belief system, what I taught was no more than a few scattered verses and aphorisms. Nothing unifies them.

I must find at least a few people who are willing to learn more, and who will be willing to teach what they've learned. I must build…not a physical community this time. I guess I understand at last how easy it is to destroy such a community. I need to create something wide-reaching and harder to kill. That's why I must teach teachers. I must create not only a dedicated little group of followers, not only a collection of communities as I once imagined, but a movement. I must create a new fashion in faith—a fashion that can evolve into a new religion, a new guiding force, that can help humanity to put its great energy, competitiveness, and creativity to work doing the truly vast job of fulfilling the Destiny.

But first, somehow, I must find my child.

I am alone, and I know that's stupid. To travel alone is to make yourself more vulnerable than you need to be. I wish I could have talked Harry into working with me. He's endangering himself and wasting his time down in southern California and around the Bay Area. I don't believe there's

any chance at all that our kids have been shipped down there. They're here. And his kids and mine are so young that they've surely been adopted. My Larkin could grow up believing that she is the daughter of one her kidnappers. His kids were four and two when they were taken, so I suspect the same could happen to them—if we let it.

Tomorrow, I'll start walking toward Eureka. I'm armed. I've got the old .45 semiautomatic that made the trip up from Robledo with me. I had tucked it into one of the caches, thinking I wouldn't need it again. Also, I've done all that seemed reasonable to make myself look both poor and male. I'm big and plain. That's good camouflage, at least. It's not real protection, but it's the best I can do. If someone shoots me, I've got no backup, so chances are, I'm dead. But I'm not the only solitary walker out there, and maybe the robbers and the crazies will go for the smaller ones who look like less trouble. And there are fewer robbers and crazies. Or there were. At Georgetown and on my way here, I saw more and more men in military uniforms—or parts of uniforms. They helped fight Jarret's stupid Al-Can war. Now a lot of them are having a hard time earning a living—and they're often very well armed.

There are more slavers now that Jarret's Crusaders have joined Cougar and his friends in the game of collaring people and grabbing their kids. I'm hoping to be invisible to them. I want to keep quiet, do my work, and to look just crazy enough to encourage people to let me alone. As a man, though, I must be very careful how I follow up the few leads I have on small Black children who have appeared all of a sudden in families where no one was pregnant. I don't want to be mistaken for a lurking child molester or a kidnapper.

I hope to work for meals in Eureka and Arcata—a little

yard work, some painting, some minor carpentry, wood that needs chopping….If I stay away from the wealthier neighborhoods, I should be all right. Wealthy people wouldn't need to hire me anyway. They would keep a few servants—people working for room and board. I would be working for what was left of the middle class. I would be just one more day laborer working for his next meal.

Down south and in the Bay Area, a laborer's life would be harder. People are too distrustful of one another, too walled off from one another if they can afford walls. But up here, men are hired, and then at least decently fed. They might even be allowed to sleep in a shed, a garage, or a barn. And they might—often do—get a look at the kids of the family. They might—often do—hear talk that later proves useful. For most laborers, useful means they might be steered toward other jobs or away from trouble or let in on where people keep their valuables. For me, useful might mean rumors of adoptions, fosterings, and children's homes.

I'll wander around the Eureka-Arcata complex and the surrounding towns for as long as I can. Allie has promised to go on collecting information for me, and she says I can crash in her rooms at Georgetown when I need a rest in a real bed. Also, if I'm picked up and collared, Dolores will vouch for me—for a fee, of course. She knows what I'm doing. She doesn't think I've got a chance in hell of succeeding, but she's got kids and grandkids, so she knows I have to do this.

"I'd do the same thing myself," she said when I talked to her. "I'd do all I could. Goddamn these so-called religious people. Thieves and murderers—that's all they are. They should wear the collar. They should roast in hell!"

There are times when I wish I believed in hell—other than the hells we make for one another, I mean.

I've spent my first week doing other people's scutwork. Odd how familiar all the jobs are—helping to plant vegetable or flower gardens, chopping weeds, pruning bushes and small trees, cleaning up a winter's accumulation of trash, repairing fences, and so on. These are all things I did at Acorn where everyone did everything. People seem pleased and a little surprised that I do good work. I've even earned some money by suggesting extra jobs that I was willing to take care of for a fee. People warn their kids away from me most of the time, but I do get to see the kids, from babies in their mothers' arms to toddlers to older kids and neighbor kids. I haven't seen any familiar faces yet, but, of course, I've just begun. I've gone to as many Black or mixed-race families as I could. I don't know what kind of people I should be checking, but it seemed best to begin with these people. If they seem at all friendly, I ask them if they have friends who might hire me. That's gotten me a couple of jobs so far.

My problem has turned out to be having a place to sleep. A guy offered to let me sleep in his garage that first night if I'd give him a blow job.

I wasn't sure whether he thought I was a man or had spotted that I was a woman, and I didn't care. I bedded down that night in a shabby park where a few redwood trees survive. There, among a small flock of other homeless people, I slept safely and awoke early to avoid the police. People in Georgetown have warned me that collaring vagrants is what cops do when they need some arrests to justify their paychecks. It's also what some of the meaner ones do when they've had no amusement for a while.

It was cold, but I've got warm, lightweight clothing and

a comfortable, shabby old sleepsack that I'd used on the trip up from Robledo. I woke up aching a little from the uneven ground, but otherwise all right. I needed a bath, but compared to the amount of crud I used to accumulate back in Camp Christian, I was almost presentable. I had already decided that I'd wash when I could, sleep sheltered when I could. I can't afford to let myself worry about things like that.

On Tuesday, I was allowed to sleep in a toolshed, which was a good thing, because it rained hard.

On Wednesday I was back in the park, although the woman I worked for told me that I should go to the shelter at the Christian America Center on Fourth Street.

Hell of a thought. I've known for weeks that the place existed, and I've kept well clear of it. Laborers at Georgetown say they avoid the place. People have been known to vanish from there. I'm afraid I'll have to go there someday, though. I need to hear more about what the CA people do with orphans. Problem is, I don't know how I'll be able to stand it. I hate those bastards so much. There are moments when I'd kill them all if I could. *I hate them.*

And I'm terrified of them. What if someone recognizes me? That's unlikely, but what if? I can't go to the CA Center yet. I'll make myself do it soon, but not yet. I'd rather blow my own brains out than wear a collar again.

On Thursday, I was in the park, but on Friday and Saturday, I slept in the garage of an old woman who wanted her fence re- paired and painted and her windowsills sanded and painted. Her neighbor kept coming over "to chat." I understood that the neighbor was just making sure that I wasn't murdering her friend, and I didn't mind. It turned out well in the end. The neighbor wound up hiring me herself to chop weeds, prepare the soil, and put in her

vegetable and flower gardens. That was good because she was my reason for going to her part of town. She was a blond woman with a blond husband, and yet I had heard through my contacts at Georgetown that she had two beautiful dark-haired, dark-skinned toddlers.

The woman turned out to be not well off at all, and yet she paid me a few dollars in addition to a couple of good meals for the work I did. I liked her, and I was glad when I saw that the two children she had adopted were strangers. I write now in her garage, where there is an electric light and a cot. It's cold, of course, but I'm wrapped up and warm enough except for my hands. I need to write now more than ever because I have no one to talk to, but writing is cold work on nights like this.

SUNDAY, MAY 13, 2035

I've been to the Christian America Center. I've finally made myself go there. It was like making myself step into a big nest of rattlesnakes, but I've done it. I couldn't sleep there. Even without Day Turner's experience to guide me, I couldn't have slept in the rattler's nest. But I've eaten there three times now, trying to hear what there might be to hear. I remember Day Turner telling me that he had been offered a bed, meals, and a few dollars if he helped paint and repair a couple of houses that were to be part of a CA home for orphaned children. He had not known the addresses of the houses. Nor had he known Eureka well enough to give me an idea where these houses might be, and that was a shame. Our children might not still be there—if they were ever there. But I might be able to learn something from the place. There might be records that I could steal or rumors,

memories, stories that I could hear about. And if several of our children had been sent there, then perhaps I could find one or two of them still there.

That last thought scared me a little. If I did find a couple of our kids, I couldn't leave them in CA hands. One way or another, I would have to free them and try to reunite them with their families. That would draw such attention to me that I would have to leave the area, and, I suspect, leave my Larkin. This is assuming that I would be able to leave, that I didn't wind up wearing another collar.

The food at the CA Center was edible—a couple of slices of bread and a rich stew of potatoes and vegetables flavored with beef, although I never found meat of any kind in it. People around me complained about the lack of meat, but I didn't mind. Over the past several months, I've learned to eat whatever was put in front of me, and be glad of it. If I could keep it down, and there was enough of it to fill my stomach, I considered myself lucky. But it amazed me that I could keep anything down while sitting so close to my enemies at the CA Center.

My first visit was the worst. My memory of it isn't as clear as it ought to be. I know I went there. I sat and I ate with several dozen other homeless men. I managed not to go crazy when someone began to preach at us. I know I did all that, and I know that afterward, I needed the long, long walk to the park to get my head back into working order. Walking, like writing, helps.

I did it all in blind terror. How I looked to others I don't know. I think I must have seemed too mentally sick even to talk to. No one tried to make conversation with me, although some of the men talked to one another. I got in line and after that I moved automatically, did what others did. Once I sat down with my food, I found myself

crouching over it, protecting it, gulping it like a hawk who's caught a pigeon. I used to see people doing that at Camp Christian. You got so damned hungry there sometimes, it made you a little crazy. This time, though, it wasn't the food that I cared about. I wasn't that hungry. And if I'd wanted to, I could have changed my clothing, gone in to a decent restaurant, and bought a real meal. It's just that somehow, if I focused on the food and filled my mind with it as well as my body, I could keep myself still and not get up and run, screaming, out of that place.

I have never, in freedom, been so afraid. People edged away from me. I mean crazies, junkies, whores, and thieves edged away from me. I didn't think about it at the time. I didn't think about anything. I'm surprised that I manage to remember any of it now. I moved through it in a cloud of blank terror and an absolute readiness to kill.

I had wrapped my gun in my spare clothes and put it at the bottom of my pack. I did this on purpose so that there would be no quick way for me to get at it. I didn't want to be tempted to get at it. If I needed it inside the CA Center, I was already dead. I couldn't leave it anywhere, but I could unload it. I took a lot of time earlier that evening, unloading it and wrapping it up, watching myself wrap it up so that even in the deepest panic I would know I couldn't get at it.

It worked. It was necessary, and it worked.

Years ago, when my neighborhood in Robledo burned, when so much of my family burned, I had to go back. I got away in the night, and the next day, I had to go back. I had to retrieve what I could of that part of my life that was over, and I had to say goodbye. I had to. Up to that moment, and long afterward, going back to my Robledo neighborhood was the hardest thing I had ever done. This was worse.

When I went to the CA Center for the second time

several days later, it wasn't as bad. I could look and think and listen. I have no memory of any word said during the first visit. I tried to listen, but I couldn't take anything in. But during the second, I heard people talking about the food, about employers who didn't pay, about women—I was in the men's section—about places up north, out east, or down south were there was work, about joints that hurt, about the war….I listened and I looked. After a while, I saw myself. I saw a man crouching over his food, spooning it into his mouth with intense and terrible concentration. His eyes, when he looked up, looked around, were vacant and scary. In line, he shambled more than he walked. If anyone got close to him, he looked insanity and death at them. He was barely human. People kept away from him. Maybe he was on something. He was big. He might be dangerous. I kept away from him myself. But he was me a few days before. I never found out what his particular problems were, but I know they were as terrible to him as mine are to me.

I heard almost nothing about orphaned children or Jarret's Crusaders. A couple of the men mentioned that they had kids. Most don't talk much, but some can't stop talking: their long-lost homes, women, money, brave deeds and suffering during the war….Nothing useful.

Still I went back for the third time last night. Same food. They throw in different vegetables—whatever they happen to have, I suppose. The only inevitable ingredient in the stew is potatoes, but dinner is always vegetable stew and bread. And after the meal, there's always at least an hour of sermon to bear. The doors are shut. You eat, then you listen. Then you can leave or try to get a bed.

My first sermon I couldn't remember if my life depended on it. The second was about Christ curing the sick and being willing to cure us too if we only asked. The third

was about Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever.

The lay minister who delivered this third sermon was Marc.

It was him, my brother, a lay minister in the Church of Christian America.

In fear and surprise, I lowered my head, wondering whether he had seen me. There were about two hundred other people in the men's cafeteria that night—men of all races, ethnicities, and degrees of sanity. I sat toward the back of the cafeteria, and off to the left of the podium or pulpit or whatever it was. After a while I looked up without raising my head. Nothing of Marc's body language indicated that he had seen me. As he warmed to his sermon, though, he did mention that he had a sister who was steeped in sin, a sister who had been raised in the way of the Lord, but who had permitted herself to be pulled down by Satan. This sister had, through the influence of Satan, done him a great injury, he said, but he had forgiven her. He loved her. It hurt him that she would not turn from sin. It hurt him that he had had to turn from her. He shed a few tears and shook his head. At last he said, "Jesus Christ was your Savior yesterday. He is your Savior today. He will be your Savior forever. Your sister might desert you. Your brother might betray you. Your friends might try to pull you down into sin. But Jesus will always be there for you. So hold on to the Lord! Hold on! Stand firm in your faith. Be courageous. Be strong. Be a soldier of Christ. He will help you and protect you. He will raise you up and never, never, never let you down!"

When it was over, I started to slip away with the crowd. I needed to think. I had to figure out how to reach Marc outside the CA Center. At the last minute, I went back

and left a note for the lay minister with one of the servers. It said, “Heard you preach tonight. Didn’t know you were here. Need to see you. Out front tomorrow evening where dinner line forms up.” And I signed it Bennett O.

One of our brothers was named Bennett Olamina. Olamina was an unusual name. Someone in CA might notice it and remember it from records of the inmates at Camp Christian. Also, it occurred to me that signing the name I was using, “Cory Duran,” might be cruel. Cory was Marc’s mother, after all, not mine. I didn’t want to remind him of the pain of losing her or hint that she might be alive. And if I had written Lauren O., I thought Marc might decide not to come. We hadn’t parted on the best of terms, after all. Perhaps it’s also cruel to hint to him that one of our two youngest brothers might still be alive. Perhaps he’ll know or guess that I wrote the note. But I had to use a name that would get his attention. I must see him. If he won’t do anything else, surely he’ll help me find Larkin. He can’t know what happened to us. I don’t believe he would have joined CA if he knew it was made up of thieves, kidnappers, slavers, and murderers. He wanted to lead, to be important, to be respected, but he had been a slave prostitute himself. No matter how angry he was at me, he wouldn’t wish me captivity and a collar. At least, I don’t believe he would.

The truth is, I don’t know what to believe.

An old man is letting me sleep in his garage tonight. I chopped weeds and cleared trash for him today. Now I’m content. I’ve spread some flat boards over the concrete and covered the boards with rags. In my sleepsack on top of these, I’m pretty comfortable. There’s even a filthy old flush toilet and a sink with running water out here—a real luxury. I had a wash. Now I want to sleep, but all I can do, all I can think of is Marc in *that place*, Marc with *those*

people. Maybe he was even there at the time of my first visit. We might have seen each other and not known. What would he have done, I wonder, if he had recognized me?

EIGHTEEN

From EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING

Beware:
All too often,
We say
What we hear others say.
We think
What we're told that we think.
We see
What we're permitted to see.
Worse!
We see what we're told that we see.

Repetition and pride are the keys to this.
To hear and to see
Even an obvious lie
Again
And again and again
May be to say it,
Almost by reflex
Then to defend it
Because we've said it
And at last to embrace it
Because we've defended it
And because we cannot admit

That we've embraced and defended
An obvious lie.

Thus, without thought,
Without intent,
We make
Mere echoes
Of ourselves—
And we say
What we hear others say.

FROM *Warrior by Marcos Duran*

I'VE ALWAYS BELIEVED IN the power of God, distant and profound. But more immediately, I believe in the power of religion itself as a great mover of masses. I wonder if that's odd in the son of a Baptist minister. I think my father honestly believed that faith in God was enough. He lived as though he believed it. But it didn't save him.

I began preaching when I was only a boy. I prayed for the sick and saw some of them healed under my hands. I was given tithings of money and food by people who had not enough to eat themselves. People who were old enough to be my parents came to me for advice, reassurance, and comfort. I was able to help them. I knew the Bible. I had my own version of my father's quiet, caring, confident manner. I was only in my teens, but I found people interesting. I liked them and I understood how to reach them. I've always been a good mimic, and I'd had more education than most of the people I dealt with. Some Sundays in my Robledo slum church, I had as many as 200 people listening as I preached, taught, prayed, and passed the plate.

But when the city authorities decided that we were no more than trash to be swept out of our homes, my prayers had no power to stop them. The city authorities were

stronger and richer.

They had more and better guns. They had the power, the knowledge, and the discipline to bury us.

The governments, city, county, state, and federal plus the big rich companies were the sources of money, information, weapons—real physical power. But in post-Pox America, successful churches were only sources of influence. They offered people safe emotional catharsis, a sense of community, and ways to organize their desires, hopes, and fears into systems of ethics. Those things were important and necessary, but they weren't power. If this country was ever to be restored to greatness, it wasn't the little dollar-a-dozen preachers who would do it.

Andrew Steele Jarret understood this. When he created Christian America and then moved from the pulpit into politics, when he pulled religion and government together and cemented the link with money from rich businessmen, he created what should have been an unstoppable drive to restore the country. And he became my teacher.

I love my Uncle Marc. There were times when I was more than half in love with him. He was so good-looking, and a beautiful person, male or female, can get away with saying and doing things that would destroy a plainer one. I never stopped loving him. Even my mother, I think, loved him in spite of herself.

What Uncle Marc had been through as a slave marked him, I'm sure, but I don't know how much. How can you know what a man would be like if he had grown up unmarked by horror? What did my mother's time as a beaten, robbed, raped slave do to her? She was always a woman of obsessive purpose and great physical courage. She had always been willing to

sacrifice others to what she believed was right. She recognized that last characteristic in Uncle Marc, but I don't believe she ever saw it clearly in herself.

FROM *The Journals of Lauren Oya Olamina*
MONDAY, MAY 14, 2035

I met with my brother earlier tonight.

I spent the day helping my latest employer—a likable old guy full of stories of his adventures as a young man in the 1970s. He was a singer and guitar player, with a band. They traveled the world, played raucous music, and had wild sex with hundreds, maybe thousands, of eager young girls. Lies, I suppose.

We put in a vegetable garden and pruned some of the dead limbs from his fruit trees. I don't mean "we," of course. He said, "Well, how about we do this?" Or, "Do you think we can do that?" And he tried to help, and that was all right. He needed to feel useful, just as he needed someone to hear his outrageous stories. He told me he was 88 years old. His two sons are dead. His middle-aged granddaughter and his several young great-grandchildren live in Edmonton, Alberta, up in Canada. He was alone except for a neighbor lady who looked in now and then. And she was 74 herself.

He said I could stay as long as I wanted to if I would help him out in the house and outside. The house wasn't in good shape. It had been neglected for years. I couldn't have done all the repairs, of course, even if he could have afforded the needed materials. But I decided to stay for a few days to do what I could. I didn't dare stay long enough for him to begin to depend on me, but a few days.

I thought that would give me a base to work from while I got to know my brother again.

I'm trying to decide how to talk about my meeting with Marc. Tonight's walk back to the old man's house has helped me to relax a little, calm down a little. But not enough.

Marc was waiting near the long dinner line when I arrived. He looked so handsome and at ease in his clean, stylish, casual
clothing. He had worn a dark blue suit when he preached the night before, and he had managed, even as he told a couple of hundred thieves and winos how awful I was, to look startlingly beautiful.

"Marc," I said.

He jumped, then turned to stare at me. He had glanced in my direction, but it was obvious that he hadn't recognized me until I spoke to him. He had been encouraging a man in line ahead of me to accept Jesus Christ as his personal Savior and let Jesus help with his drinking problem. It seemed that the CA Center had a rigorous drying-out program, and Marc had been working hard to sell it.

"Let's take a walk around the corner and talk," I said, and before he could recover or answer, I turned and walked away, certain that he would follow. He did. We were well away from the line and well away from any listening ears when he caught up.

"Lauren!" he said. "My God, Lauren, is it you? What in hell are you—?"

I led him around the corner, out of sight of the line, and onto a dirty little side street that led to the bay. I went on several steps down that street, then stopped and turned

and looked at him.

He stood frowning, staring at me, looking uncertain, surprised, almost angry. There was no shame or defensiveness about him. That was good. His reaction on seeing me would have been different, I'm sure, if he had known what his Camp Christian friends had been doing to me.

"I need your help," I said. "I need you to help me to find my daughter."

This made nothing at all clear to him, but it did shift him away from anger, which was what I wanted. "What?" he said.

"Your people have her. They took her. I don't…I don't believe that they've killed her. I don't know what they've done with her, but I suspect that one of them has adopted her. I need you to help me find her."

"Lauren, what are you talking about? What are you doing here? Why are you trying to look like a man? How did you find me?"

"I heard you preach last night."

And again he was reduced to saying, "What?" This time he looked a little embarrassed, a little apprehensive.

"I've been coming here in the hope of finding out what CA does with the children it takes."

"But these people don't take children! I mean, they rescue orphans from the streets, but they don't—"

"And they 'rescue' the children of heathens, don't they? Well, they 'rescued' my daughter Larkin and all the rest of the younger children of Acorn! They killed my Bankole! And Zahra! Zahra Moss Balter from Robledo! They killed her! They put a collar around my neck and around the necks of my people. CA did that! And then those holy Christians worked us like slaves every day and used us like whores at

night! That's what they did. That's what kind of people they are. Now I need your help to find my daughter!" All that came out in a rush, in a harsh, ugly whisper, my face up close to his, my emotions almost out of control. I hadn't meant to spit it all out at him that way. I needed him. I meant to tell him everything, but not like that.

He stared at me as though I were speaking to him in Chinese. He put his hand on my shoulder. "Lauren, come in. Have some food, a bath, a clean bed. Come on in. We need to talk."

I stood still, not letting him move me. "Listen," I said in a more human voice. "Listen, I know I'm dumping a lot on you, Marc, and I'm sorry." I took a deep breath. "It's just that you're the only person I've felt that I could dump it on. I need your help. I'm desperate."

"Come on in." He wasn't quite humoring me. He seemed to be in denial, but not speaking of it. He was trying to divert me, tempt me with meaningless comforts.

"Marc, if it's possible, I will never set foot in that poisonous place again. Now that I've found you, I shouldn't have to."

"But these people will help you, Lauren. You're making some kind of mistake. I don't understand it, but you are. We would rather take in whole families than separate them. I've worked on the apartments that we're renovating to help get people off the streets. I know—"

Now he was humoring me. "Have you ever heard of a place called Camp Christian?" I asked, letting the harshness come back into my voice. He was silent for a moment, but I knew before he spoke that the answer to my question was *yes.*

"I wouldn't have named it that," he said. "It's a reeducation camp—one of the places where the worst

people we handle are sent. These are people who would go to prison if we didn't take them. Minor criminals, most of them—thieves, junkies, prostitutes, that kind of thing. We try to reach them, teach them skills and self-discipline, stop them from graduating to real prisons."

I listened, shaking my head. He was either a great actor or he believed what he was saying. "Camp Christian *was* a prison," I said. "For seventeen months it was a prison. Before that, it was Acorn. My people and I built Acorn with our own hands, then your Christian America took it, stole it from us, and turned it into a prison camp."

He just stood there, staring at me as though he didn't know what to believe or what to do.

"Back in September," I said, keeping my voice low and even. "Back in September of 33, they came with seven maggots, smashing through our thorn fence, picking off our watchers. I knew we couldn't fight a force like that. I signaled everyone to run like hell, scatter. You know we had drills—drills for fighting and drills for fading into the hills. None of it mattered. They gassed us. Three people might have gotten away: the mute woman named May and the two little Noyer girls. I don't know. They were the only ones we never heard anything about. The rest of us were captured, collared, and used for work and for sex. Our younger children were taken away. No one would tell us where. My Bankole, Zahra Balter, Teresa Lin, and some others were killed. If we asked anything, we were punished with the collars. If we were caught talking at all, we were punished. We slept on the floor or on shelves in the school. Your holy men took our houses. And they took us, too, when they felt like it. Listen!"

He had stopped looking at me and begun to look past me, looking over my right shoulder.

“They brought in street people and travelers and minor criminals and other mountain families, and they collared them too,” I said. “Marc! Do you hear me?”

“I don’t believe you,” he said at last. “I don’t believe any of this!”

“Go and look at what’s left of Acorn. Look for yourself. Go to one of the other so-called reeducation camps. I’ll bet they’re just as bad. Check them out.”

He began to shake his head. “This is not true! I know these people! They wouldn’t do what you’re accusing them of.”

“Maybe some of them wouldn’t. But some of them did. All that we built they stole.”

“I don’t believe you,” he said. But he did believe. “You’re making some kind of mistake.”

“Go and see for yourself,” I repeated. “Be careful how you ask questions. I don’t want you to get into trouble. These are dangerous, vicious people. Go and see.”

He said nothing for a few seconds. It bothered me that he was frowning, and again, not looking at me. “You were collared?” he asked at last.

“For seventeen months. Forever.”

“How did you get away? Was your sentence up?”

“What? What sentence?”

“I mean did they let you go?”

“They never let anyone go. They killed quite a few of us, but they never released anyone. I don’t know what their long-range plans were for us, if they had any, but I don’t see how they could have dared to let us go after what they’d done to us.”

“How did you get free? You don’t escape once someone’s put a collar on you. There’s no escape from a collar.”

Unless someone deals with the devil and buys your freedom, I thought. But I didn't say it. "There was a landslide," I did say. "It smashed the cabin where the control unit was kept—my cabin. The control unit powered all the individual belt control units somehow. Maybe it even powered the collars themselves. I'm not sure. Anyway, once it was smashed and buried, the collars stopped working, and we went into our homes and killed our surviving guards—those who hadn't been killed by the landslide. Then we burned the cabins with their bodies inside. We burned them. They were ours! We built every one with our own hands."

"You killed people…?"

"Their names were Cougar, Marc. Every one of them was named Cougar!"

He turned—wrenched himself around as though he had to uproot himself to move—and started back toward the corner.

"Marc!"

He kept walking.

"Marc!" I grabbed his arm, pulled him back around to face me. "I didn't tell you this to hurt you. I know I have hurt you, and I'm sorry but these bastards have my child! I need your help to get her back. Please, Marc."

He hit me.

I never expected it, never saw it coming. Even when we were kids, he and I didn't hit each other.

I stumbled backward, more startled than hurt. And he was gone. By the time I got to the corner, he had already vanished into the CA Center.

I was afraid to go in after him. In his present frame of mind, he might turn me in. How will I get to see him again? Even if he decides to help me, how will I contact him?

Surely he will decide to help me once he's had time to think. Surely he will.

SUNDAY, JUNE 3, 2035

I've left the Eureka-Arcata area.

I'm back at the message tree for the night. I brought a flashlight so that I could have light where I wanted it without taking risks with fire. Now, shielding my light, I'm reading what's been left here. Jorge and Di have left a number, and Jorge says he's found his brother Mateo. In fact, as with Justin, his brother found him. On the northern edge of Garberville where there are still big redwoods, Mateo found Jorge's group sleeping on the ground. He had been looking for them for months. Like Justin, he had run away from abuse, although in his case, the abuse was sexual. Now he's wounded and bitter, but he's with his brother again.

There was no news from Harry. Too soon for him to have gotten back, I suppose. I phoned him several times, but there was no answer. I'm worried about him.

I wrote a note, warning the others to avoid the CA Center in Eureka. I wrote that Marc had been there, but that he wasn't to be trusted.

He isn't to be trusted.

I made myself go back to the CA Center on Wednesday of last week—went back as a sane, but shabby woman rather than as a dirty, crazy man. It took me too long to get up the courage to do that—to go. I worried that Marc might have warned his CA friends about me. I couldn't really believe he would do that, but he might, and I'd had nightmares about them grabbing me as soon as I showed up.

I could feel them putting on the collar. I'd wake up soaking wet and scared to death.

At last, I went to a used-clothing store and bought an old black skirt and a blue blouse. From a cheap little shop, I bought some makeup and a scarf for my hair. I dressed, made up, then dirtied up a little, like maybe I'd been rolling around on the ground with someone.

At CA, I got in line with the other women and ate in the small, walled-off women's section. No one seemed to pay any attention to me, although my height was much more noticeable when I was among only women. I slumped a little and kept my head down when I was standing. I tried to look weary and bedraggled rather than furtive, but I discovered that furtive wasn't all that unusual. Most of the women, like most of the men, were stolid, indifferent, enduring. But a few were chattering crazies, whiners, or frightened little rabbits. There was also a fat woman with only one eye who prowled the room and tried to grab bread from your hands even while you were eating it. She was crazy, of course, but her particular craziness made her nasty and possibly dangerous. She let me alone, but harassed several of the smaller women until a tiny, feisty woman pulled a knife on her.

Then the servers called security, and security men came out of a back room and grabbed both women from behind.

It bothered me very much that they took both women away. The fat crazy woman had been permitted to go about her business until someone resisted. Then both victim and victimizer were treated as equally guilty.

It bothered me even more that the women were not thrown out. They were taken away. Where? They didn't come back. No one I spoke to knew what had happened to them.

Most troubling of all, I recognized one of the security men. He had been at Acorn. He had been one of our "teachers" there. I had seen him take Adela Ortiz away to rape her. I could shut my eyes and see him dragging her off to the cabin he used. There had to be many such men still alive and free—men who were not at Camp Christian when we took back our freedom, then took our revenge. But this was the first one that I had seen.

My fear and my hate returned full force and all but choked me. It took all my self-control to sit still, eat my food, and go on being the lump I had to seem to be. Day Turner had been collared after a fight that he said he had had nothing to do with. Christian America officials made themselves judges, juries, and, when they chose to be, executioners. They didn't waste any effort trying to be fair. I had heard on one of my earlier visits that the all-male CA Center Security Force was made up of retired and off-duty cops. That, if it were true, was terrifying. It made me all the more certain that I was right not to go to the police with the true story of what had been done to me and to Acorn. Hell, I hadn't even been able to get my own brother to believe me. What chance would I have to convince the cops if some of them were working for CA?

After dinner, after the sermon, I managed to make myself go up to one of the servers—a blond woman with a long red scar on her forehead. She was one of the few who laughed and talked with us as she scooped stew into bowls and passed out bread. I asked her to give my note to lay minister Marcos Duran. As it happened, she knew him.

"He's not here anymore," she said. "He was transferred to Portland."

"Oregon?" I asked, and then felt stupid. Of course she meant Portland, Oregon.

“Yeah,” the server said. “He left a few days ago. He was offered a chance to do more preaching at our new center in Portland, and he’s always wanted that. What a nice man. We were sorry to lose him. Did you ever hear him preach?”

“A couple of times,” I said. “Are you sure he’s gone?”

“Yeah. We had a party for him. He’ll be a great minister someday. A great minister. He’s so spiritual.” She sighed.

Maybe “spiritual” is another word for fantastically good-looking in her circles. Anyway, he was gone. Instead of helping me find Larkin or even seeing me again, he had gone.

I thanked the server and headed out into the evening toward the home of the 88-year-old man where I was still staying. I had left my spare clothing and my sleepsack in his garage. For once, I was traveling light. My backpack was half-empty. I walked automatically, not thinking about where I was going. I was wondering whether I could reach Marc again, wondering whether it would do me any good to reach him. What would he do if I showed up in Portland? Run for Seattle? Why had he run, anyway? I wouldn’t have hurt him—wouldn’t have said or done anything that could damage his lay-minister reputation. Did he run because I mentioned Cougar? Maybe it had been a mistake for me to tell him what happened to us, to Acorn. Maybe I should have told him the same thing I had told the police. “Well, I was walking north on U.S. 101, heading for Eureka, and these guys….”

Was it so essential for him to be important in CA that he didn’t care what vicious things CA was doing, didn’t care even what CA did to the only family he had left?

Then there was a man looming in front of me—a huge man, tall and broad and wearing a CA Center Security uniform. I stopped just before I would have slammed into

him. I jumped back. My impulse was to run like hell. This guy looked scary enough to make anyone run. But the truth was, I was frozen with fear. I couldn't move. I just stared up at him.

He put a huge hand inside his uniform jacket, and I had a flash of it coming out holding a gun—not that this guy needed a gun to kill me. He was a giant.

But his hand came out of his jacket holding an envelope—a little white paper envelope like the kind mail used to come in. Back when we lived in Robledo my father sometimes brought home paper mail from the college in such envelopes.

"Reverend Duran said to give this to anyone tall and Black and asking for him by name," the giant said. He had a soft, quiet voice that made his appearance less threatening somehow. "Looks like you qualify," he finished.

I had to make myself reach out and take the envelope.

The giant stared at me for a moment, then said, "He told me you were his sister."

I nodded.

"He said you might be dressed as a man."

I didn't answer. I couldn't quite form words yet.

"He said he's sorry. He asked me to tell you that you could get a bed at the Center for as long as you needed one. I'll be around. He's my friend. I'll look out for you."

"No," I said, getting my voice to work at last. "But thank you." I stood straight, never knowing when I had crouched in my fear. I extended a hand, and the giant took it and shook it. "Thank you," I repeated, and he was gone, striding back toward the Center.

I didn't stop to think. I tucked Marcus's envelope into my blouse and walked on. You didn't stand opening things on dark streets in this part of town. I kept my ears open

now, and paid attention to my surroundings. The giant had caught up with me, passed me, and gotten in front of me and I hadn't heard a thing. That kind of inattention was beyond stupid. It was suicidal.

And yet I had almost relaxed again by the time I was only three blocks from the old man's little house. I was tired, full of food, looking forward to my warm pallet, and eager to see what my brother had written.

Then, through my preoccupations, I began to hear footsteps. I swung around just in time to startle and confront the two men who were creeping up behind me. My gun was out of reach in my backpack, but my knife was in my pocket. I grabbed it and flipped it open before these guys could recover and clean the street with me. They weren't big, but there were two of them. I put my back against someone's redwood fence, and let them decide how much they wanted what they thought I had. In fact I was carrying not only my gun but enough money to make them happy for days, as well as Marcus's note, and I wasn't eager to give up any of it.

"Just put the pack down, girl," one said. "Put the pack down and back away from it. We'll let you go."

I didn't move. To take my pack off, I would have had to lower my knife and trust these two not to jump me. That I didn't dare do. I didn't answer them. I wasn't interested in talking to them. I hated hearing the one call me "girl." It was what Bankole called me with love. And here was the word in someone else's mouth with contempt.

I don't know whether or not I was being stupid. I know I was scared to death and I was angry. I tried to stoke the anger.

I saw that one of them had a knife too. It was an old steak knife, but it was a knife—made for cutting meat.

The one with the knife lunged at me. An instant later, the other lunged too—one to cut, one to grab.

I dropped to the ground and stabbed upward into the belly of the knife-wielder. As I jerked my knife free, not looking, not wanting to see what I had done, I rammed my body backward against the legs of the other man—or against where his legs should have been. I only hit one of them—enough to trip him, but he seemed to recover without falling. Then he did fall. He toppled like a tree as I scrambled to my feet.

They were both down, one curled around his belly wound, groaning, and the other making no sound at all except his rasping breathing. The steak knife stuck out of him just below the breastbone.

Shit.

I fell to my knees, my body a flaming mass of agony, from other people's knife wounds. I twisted away from them both, crawled away from them on all fours, dripping tears at the terrible, terrible pain. I dragged myself around a corner and sat there on the broken concrete for a long time. I was shaking with the pain, gasping with it until at last, it began to ease. I got up before it was altogether gone. I went to the old man's garage as quickly as I could. The pain was gone by the time I got there, and the anger had long since gone. There was nothing left but the fear. I got my things together as fast as I could, stuffed them into my pack, and headed out of town. Maybe I didn't have to leave. Maybe the tramp who had been living in the old man's garage would never be connected with the two dead or soon-to-be dead men on the street nearby. Maybe.

But I would not risk a collar.

So I ran.

So I run. I had to check the tree before I headed for

Portland, and I'm going to stop at Georgetown. Then I'll take an inland route and avoid Eureka. Meanwhile, here are the words my brother left me:

"Lauren, I'm sorry I hit you—really sorry. I hope I didn't hurt you too much. It's just that I couldn't stand to lose everything *again*. I just couldn't. That keeps happening to me. Mom and Dad, the Durans, and even Acorn, where I thought maybe I could stay. And I couldn't see how anyone connected with Christian America could do what you say has been done. I could barely stand to hear you say it. I knew it was just wrong. It had to be.

"And I was right. The people who do the kind of thing you described are a splinter group. Jarret has disclaimed all connection with them. They call themselves Jarret's Crusaders, but they lie. They're extremists who believe that reeducating heathen adults and placing their young children in Christian American homes is the only way to restore order and greatness. If Acorn was attacked, these are the likely attackers. I've talked to my friends in CA, and they say it isn't safe to probe too deeply into what the Crusaders are doing. The Crusaders are a kind of secret society, absolutely dedicated, and ruthless. They're courageous people. Misguided, but courageous. I've been told they really do find good homes for the children they rescue. That's what they call it—rescuing the children. They take them into their own homes if necessary and raise them as their children or they find others to raise them. Problem is, they're a nationwide group. They send the kids out of their home areas—often out of their home states. They're serious about raising these kids as good Christian Americans. They believe it would be a sin against God and a crime against America to let them be reunited with their heathen parents.

"I've heard all this second- or third-hand from at least

half a dozen people. I don't know how much of it is true. I don't know where Larkin is, and don't have any idea how to find out. I'm sorry about that, sorry about Bankole, sorry about everything.

"You probably won't like this, Lauren, but I think that if you really want to find your daughter, you should join us—join Christian America. Your cult has failed. Your god of change couldn't save you. Why not come back to where you belong? If Mom and Dad were alive, they would join. They would want you to be part of a good Christian organization that's trying to put the country back together again. I know you're smart and strong and too stubborn for your own good. If you can also be patient and join us in our work, you'll have the only chance possible of getting information about your daughter.

"I have to warn you, though, the movement won't let you preach. They agree with Saint Paul in that: 'Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach nor to usurp authority over the man but to be in silence.' But don't worry. There's plenty of other more suitable work for women to do to serve the movement.

"Some of our people have relatives or friends who are Crusaders. Join us, work hard, keep your eyes and ears open, and maybe you'll learn things that will help you find your daughter—and help you into a good, decent life as a Christian American woman.

"I don't know what else to tell you. I'm enclosing a few hundred in hard currency. I wish I could give you more. I wish I could help you more. I do wish you well, whatever you decide to do, and again, I'm sorry. Marc."

And that was that. There wasn't a word about his going to Portland—no explanation, no good-bye. No address. Had he, in fact, gone to Portland? I thought about that and

decided he had—or at least the server who told me he had believed what she was saying.

But why did my brother not mention where he was going—or even *that* he was going—in his letter? Did he think I wouldn't find out? Or was he just signaling me in a cold, deliberate way that he wanted no further contact with me. Was he saying, in effect, "You're my sister and I have a duty to help you. So here's some advice and some money. Too bad about your troubles, but I can't do any more. I've got to get on with my life."

Well, the money I could use. As far as the advice was concerned, my first impulse was to curse it, and to curse my brother for giving it. Then, for a moment, I wondered whether I could join the enemy and find my child. Perhaps I could.

Then I remembered the man I had seen at the Center—the one whom I had last seen acting as one of our "teachers" at Acorn, and raping Adela Ortiz. Perhaps he was the father of the child she would soon be having. Marc might be able to convince himself that the Crusaders are outcast extremists, but I know better. Whether CA chooses to admit it or not, they and the Crusaders have members in common. How many? What are the real connections? What does Jarret really think about the Crusaders? Does he control them? If he doesn't like what they're doing, he should make some effort to stop them. He shouldn't want them to make their insanity part of his political image.

On the other hand, one way to make people afraid of you is to have a crazy side—a side of yourself or your organization that's dangerous and unpredictable—willing to do any damned thing.

Is that what's going on? I don't know and my brother doesn't want to know.

NINETEEN

From EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING

All religions are ultimately cargo cults. Adherents perform required rituals, follow specific rules, and expect to be supernaturally gifted with desired rewards —long life, honor, wisdom, children, good health, wealth, victory over opponents, immortality after death, any desired rewards. Earthseed offers its own rewards—room for small groups of people to begin new lives and new ways of life with new opportunities, new wealth, new concepts of wealth, new challenges to grow and to learn and to decide what to become. Earthseed is the dawning adulthood of the human species. It offers the only true immortality. It enables the seeds of the Earth to become the seeds of new life, new communities on new earths. The Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars, and there, again, to grow, to learn, and to fly.

I BEGAN CREATING SECRET Dreamask scenarios when I was 12. By then, I was very much the timid, careful daughter of Kayce and Madison Alexander. I knew that even though I was allowed to use Dreamasks with strict Christian American scenarios—like the old "Asha Vere" stories—no one would be likely to approve my creating new, uncensored scenarios. I knew this because back when I was nine, I began making up plain, linear installment stories to amuse myself and my few friends

at Christian America School. It was fun. My friends liked it until we all got into trouble. Then some teacher eavesdropped, realized what I was doing, and punished me for lying. My friends were punished for not reporting my lies. We had to memorize whole chapters of Exodus, Psalms, Proverbs, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Until we had memorized and been tested on every single assigned chapter, we were allowed no free time—no recess or lunch breaks. We were kept an hour late every day. We were monitored even in the bathroom to make sure we weren't indulging in more wickedness—like stealing a minute or two "from God."

It didn't matter that I had said from the beginning that my stories were only made up. I never tried to convince anyone that they were true. And it didn't matter that the Dreamask scenarios we were all allowed to experience were equally imaginary. It was as though my teachers believed that all the possible stories had already been created, and it was a sin to make more—or at least it was a sin for me to make more.

But by the time I reached puberty, except for the pornography I managed to find, most of the scenarios I was permitted were tired, dull, boring things. Characters were always being shown the error of their ways, suffering for their sins, and then returning to God. Boys fought for Christian America. They went to war against heathens, or went out as missionaries in dangerous, wicked, foreign jungles and deserts. Girls, on the other hand, were always cooking, cleaning, sewing, crying, praying, taking care of babies or old people, and going to church. Asha Vere was unusual because she did interesting things. She saved people. She *made* them return to God. She was one of the few.

In fact as a Black and a woman, she was the only one.

A very old woman—she was in her nineties and lived in one of the nursing homes that Christian America had set up for elderly members—once told me that Asha Vere was my generation's Nancy Drew. It was years before I found out who Nancy Drew was.

Anyway, I wrote scenarios—had to write them down with a stylus in my notebook since even outside of Christian America, no one was going to trust a kid to work with a scenario recorder. At least our notebooks had a lot of memory and I could code them to erase the scenarios if someone else tried to get into them. Or I thought I could.

I wrote about having different parents—parents who cared about me and didn't wish always that I were another person, the sainted Kamaria. I didn't know at this time that I was adopted. All I had was the usual child's suspicion that I might be, and that somewhere, somehow, I might have beautiful, powerful "real" parents who would come for me someday.

I wrote about having four brothers and three sisters. The idea of eight children appealed to me. I didn't think you could be lonely in such a big family. My brothers and sisters and I had huge parties on holidays and birthdays and we were always having adventures, and I had a handsome boyfriend who was crazy about me, and the girls at school were all jealous.

Instead of living in shabby, patched-together old Seattle with its missile-strike scars, we lived in a big corporate town. We were important and had plenty of money. We spent our time speeding around in fast cars or making flashy scientific discoveries in laboratories or catching gangs of spies, embezzlers, and saboteurs.

Since this was a Mask, I could live the adventures as any of my brothers or sisters or as either of our parents. That meant I could "experience" being a boy or an adult. But since it wasn't like a real Dreamask experience, I had no sensation guidance beyond research and my imagination. I watched other people, tried to make myself feel what it might be like to drive a car or fire a gun or be an older brother who worked in the South Pacific as a deep-sea miner or an older sister who was an architect in Antarctica or a father who was CEO of a major corporation or a mother who was a molecular biologist. The father was a big, godlike man who was rich and smart and…not there most of the time. I had the hardest time being him. Research didn't help much. He was more of a shell than the others. What should a father be like inside, in his thoughts and feelings? I wasn't sure. Not like Madison, for sure. Like the fathers of my occasional friends? I saw my friends' fathers now and then, but I didn't know them. Like the minister, maybe—stern and sure of himself and usually surrounded by a lot of deferential men and smiling women, some of whom were rumored to sleep with him even though they had husbands and he had a wife. But how did he feel? What did he believe? What did he want? What scared him?

I read a lot. I watched people and I eavesdropped. I got a lot of the ideas from kids whose parents let them have

nonreligious Masks and books—bad books, we called them. In short, I tried to do what my biological mother hated, but couldn't help doing. I tried to feel what other people felt and know them—really know them.

It was all nonsense, of course. Harmless nonsense.

But when I was caught at it, it was suddenly all but criminal.

There was a theft in my Christian American History class. Someone stole a small personal phone that the teacher had left on her desk. We were all searched and our belongings collected and thoroughly examined. Someone examined my notebook too thoroughly, in spite of my self-destruct codes, and found my scenario.

I had to attend special religion classes for delinquents and get counseling. I had to confess my sins before our local church. I had to memorize a dozen or so more chapters of the Bible. While I was working off my punishment, I began to hear whispers that I was, indeed, adopted, and that I was the daughter not of rich, important, beautiful people but of the worst heathen devils—murderers, thieves, and perverters of God's word. The kids started it. There were plenty of kids around who were known to be adopted, so it was commonplace to ridicule them and make up lies about how evil their real parents were. And if you weren't adopted, and someone got mad at you, they might call you a heathen bastard whether you were or not.

So first the kids started in on me, then the adults, some of whom knew that I was adopted, began to talk. "Well, after all, think about what kind of woman her real mother must be. That's got to leave a mark on her." Or, "You wait. That girl is no good. My grandmother used to say the fruit doesn't fall far from the tree!" Or, "Well, what can you expect? 'Vere' means truth, doesn't it? And the truth is, there's bad blood in her if there ever was bad blood!"

I remember turning around in church to confront the nasty old woman who had stage-whispered this last

bit of stupidity to her equally ancient friend. The two were sitting directly behind Kayce, Madison, and me during Sunday evening service. I looked at her, and she just stared back at me as though I were an animal who had somehow invaded the church.

" 'God is love,' " I quoted to her in as sweet a voice as I could manage. And then, " 'Love is the fulfilling of the law.' " I tried to make sure that my words carried as well as her ugly stage whisper had carried. Bad blood, for heaven's sake. Kayce had told me people said things like that because they were ignorant, but that I had to respect even the ignorant because they were older.

On that particular night, Kayce nudged me with a sharp elbow the moment I spoke, and I saw the ignorant old woman's mouth turn down in a grimace of dislike and disapproval.

I had just turned 13 when that happened. I remember after church, Kayce and I had a huge fight because she said I was rude to an older person, and I said I didn't care. I said I wanted to know whether I really was adopted and if so, who were my real parents.

Kayce said she and Madison were the only parents I had to worry about, and I was an ungrateful little heathen not to appreciate what I had.

That was that.

When I was 15, an enemy at school told me my real mother was not only a heathen but a whore and a murderer. I hit her before I even thought about it—and I discovered that I didn't know my own strength. I broke her jaw. She was screaming and crying and bleeding, and I was horrified—scared to death. I got kicked out of school, and very nearly collared as a juvenile felon. Only Madison and our minister working

together managed to keep my neck out of a collar. This was the beginning of the worst part of my adolescence. I was grateful to Madison. I hadn't thought he would fight for me. I hadn't thought he would fight for anything. He had become even more of a shadow as I had grown. He repaired aging computers for poor working people. He had seemed closer to his tools than he did to me, except when he was feeling me up.

Then, on Saturday, after my troubles had been papered over, while Kayce was attending some women's-group thing at Church, Madison explained to me how grateful I should be to him. He had saved me from a collar. He read me an article about collars—how they hurt, how they can "pacify" even the most violent criminal and still leave him able to do useful work, how the holder of a collar control unit is "a virtual puppet master" as far as the convict is concerned. And although the pain that the collar can deliver is intense, it leaves no mark and does no permanent harm no matter how often it must be used.

Madison gave me some other articles to read. As I took them, he reached out with both sweaty little hands and felt my breasts.

"It wouldn't hurt you to show some gratitude," he said to me when I pulled away. "I saved you from something really brutal. I don't know. You're so ungrateful. Maybe I won't be able to save you next time." He paused. "You know, your mama wanted to let you go on and be collared. She thinks you hurt that girl on purpose." Another pause. "You need to be nice to me, Asha. I'm all you've got."

He kept after me. There were times when I thought I should just sleep with him and be done with it. But I

was back in school by then and I could stay away from home most of the time. He was such a godawful whiny man. My only good luck was that he was small, and after a while, I realized he was a little bit afraid of me. That was a shock. I had grown up timid and afraid of almost everyone—resentful, but afraid. I had to be provoked suddenly and severely to make me react with anything other than argument. That's why I was so upset when I broke the girl's jaw. Not only did I not know that I could hurt someone that badly, but I wasn't the kind of person who hurt people at all.

But somehow, Madison didn't know that.

He wouldn't let me alone, but at least he didn't use physical force on me. His moist little hands kept wandering and he kept pleading, and he watched me. His eyes followed me so much, I was afraid Kayce would notice and blame me. He tried to peek at me in the bathroom—I caught him at it twice. He tried to watch me in my bedroom when I was dressing.

At 15, I couldn't wait to get out of the house and away from both of them for good.

FROM *The Journals of Lauren Oya Olamina*
THURSDAY, JUNE 7, 2035

I'm back at Georgetown. I need to rest a little, check in with Allie, clean up, pick up some of the things I left with her, and gather what information I can. Then I'll head for Oregon. I need to get out of the area for a while, and going up where Marc is seems a good choice. He won't want to see me. He needs to be part of Christian America even though he knows that Christian America's hands are far

from clean. If he doesn't want me around reminding him what kind of people he's mixed up with, let him help me. Once I've got my child back, he'll never have to see me again—unless he wants to.

It's hard to accept even the comforts of Georgetown now. It seems that I can only stand myself when I'm moving, working, searching for Larkin. I've got to get out of here.

Allie says I should stay until next week. She says I look like hell. I suppose I did when I arrived. After all, I was pretending to be a vagrant. I've cleaned up now and gone back to being an ordinary woman. But even when I was clean, she said I looked older. "Too much older," she said.

"You've got your Justin back," I told her, and she looked away, looked at Justin, who was playing basketball with some other Georgetown kids. They had nailed an honest-to-goodness basket-without-a-bottom high up on someone's cabin wall. Early Georgetown cabins were made of notched logs, stone, and mud. They're heavy, sturdy things—so heavy that a few have fallen in and killed people during earthquakes. But a nailed-on basket and the blows of a newly stolen basketball did them no harm at all. One of the men who had a job cleaning office buildings in Eureka had brought the ball home the day before, saying he had found it in the street.

"How is Justin?" I asked Allie. She had set up a work area behind the hotel. There she made or repaired furniture, repaired or sharpened tools, and did reading and writing for people. She didn't teach reading or writing as I had. She claimed she didn't have the patience for that kind of teaching—although she was willing to show kids how to work with wood, and she fixed their broken toys for free. She continued to do repair work for the various George

businesses, but no more cleaning, no more fetching and carrying. Once Dolores George had seen the quality of her work, Allie was allowed to do the things she loved for her living and for Justin's. The repair work she was doing now for other people was for extra cash to buy clothing or books for Justin.

"I wish you'd stay and teach him," she said to me. "I'm afraid he spends too much time with kids who are already breaking into houses and robbing people. If anything makes me leave Georgetown, it will be that."

I nodded, wondering what sort of things my Larkin was learning. And the unwanted question occurred to me as it sometimes did: Was she still alive to learn anything at all? I turned my back on Allie and stared out into the vast, jumbled forest of shacks, cabins, tents, and lean-tos that was Georgetown.

"Lauren?" Allie said in a voice too soft to trust.

I looked around at her, but she was hand-sanding the leg of a chair, and not looking at me. I waited.

"You know…I had a son before Justin," she said.

"I know." Her father, who had prostituted her and her sister Jill had also murdered her baby in a drunken rage. That was why she and Jill had left home. They had waited until their father drank himself to sleep. Then they set fire to their shack with him in it and ran away. Fire again. What a cleansing friend. What a terrible enemy.

"I never even knew who my first son's father was," she said, "but I loved him—my little boy. You can't know how I loved him. He came from me, and he knew me, and he was mine." She sighed and looked up from the chair leg. "For eight whole months, he was mine."

I stared at Georgetown again, knowing where she was going with this, not really wanting to hear it. It had a nasty

enough sound when I heard it in my own head.

"I wanted to die when Daddy killed my baby. I wished he had killed me too." She paused. "Jill kept me going—kind of like back at Camp Christian, you kept me going." Another pause, longer this time. "*Lauren, you might never find her*."

I didn't say anything, didn't move.

"She might be dead."

After a while, I turned to look at her. She was staring at me, looking sad.

"I'm sorry," she said. "But it's true. And even if she's alive, you might never find her."

"You knew about your baby," I said. "You knew he was dead, not suffering somewhere, not being abused by crazy people who think they're Christians. I don't know anything. But Justin is back, and now Jorge's brother Mateo is back."

"I know, and you know that's different. Both boys are old enough to know who they are. And…and they're old enough to survive abuse and neglect."

I thought about that, understood it, turned away from it.

"You still have a life," she said.

"I can't give up on her."

"You can't now. But the time might come…."

I didn't say anything. After a while I spotted one of the men I had gotten information from back before I began working in Eureka. I went off to talk to him, see whether he'd heard anything. He hadn't.

SUNDAY, JUNE 10, 2035

It seems I'm to have a companion for my trip north. I don't

know how I feel about that. Allie sent her to me. She's a woman who should have been rich and secure with her family down in Mendocino County, but, according to her, her family didn't want her. They wanted her brother, but they'd never wanted her. She was born from the body of a hired surrogate back when that was still unusual, and although she looks much like her mother and nothing like the surrogate, her parents never quite accepted her—especially after her brother was born the old-fashioned way from the body of his own mother. At 18, she was kidnapped for ransom, but no ransom was ever paid. She knew her parents had the money, but they never paid. Her brother was the prince, but somehow, she was never the princess. Her captors had kept her for a while for sex. Then, she got the idea to make herself seem sick. She would put her finger down her throat whenever they weren't looking. Then she'd throw up all over everything. At last, in disgust and fear, her captors abandoned her down near Clear Lake. When she tried to go home, she discovered that just before the Al-Can War began, her family left the area, moved to Alaska. Now, more than a year after her kidnapping, she was on her way to Alaska to find them. The fact that the war was not yet officially over didn't faze her. She had nothing and no one except her family, and she was going north. Allie had told her to go with me, at least as far as Portland. "Watch one another's backs," she said when she brought us together. "Maybe you'll both manage to live for a while longer."

Belen Ross, the girl's name was. She pronounced it Bay-LEN, and wanted to be called Len. She looked at me—at my clean but cheap men's clothing, my short hair, my boots.

"You don't need me," she said. She's tall, thin, pale, sharp-nosed, and black-haired. She doesn't look strong, but she looks impressive, somehow. In spite of all that's

happened to her, she hasn't broken. She still has a lot of pride.

"Know how to use a gun?" I asked.

She nodded. "I'm a damned good shot."

"Then let's talk."

The two of us went up to Allie's room and sat down together at the pine table Allie had made for herself. It was simple and handsome. I ran a hand over it. "Allie shouldn't be in a place like this," I said. "She's good at what she does. She should have a shop of her own in some town."

"No one belongs in a place like this," Len said. "If children grow up here, what chance do they have?"

"What chance do you have?" I asked her.

She looked away. "This is only about our traveling together to Portland," she said.

I nodded. "Allie's right. We will have a better chance together. Lone travelers make good targets."

"I've traveled alone before," she said.

"I have too. And I know that alone, you have to fight off attacks that might not even happen at all if you aren't alone, and if you and your companion are armed."

She sighed and nodded. "You're right. I suppose I don't really mind traveling with you. It won't be for long."

I shook my head. "That's right. You won't have to put up with me for long."

She frowned at me. "Well, what more do you want? We'll get to Portland, and that will be that. We'll never see each other again."

"For now, though, I want to know that you're someone I can trust with my life. I need to know who you are, and you need to know who I am."

"Allie told me you were from a walled community down south."

“In Robledo, yes.”

“Wherever. Your community got wiped out, and you came up here to start another community. It got wiped out and you wound up here.” That sounded like Allie, giving only the bare bones of my life.

“My husband was killed, my child kidnapped, and my community destroyed,” I said. “I’m looking for my child—and for any children of my former community. Only two have been found so far—two of the oldest. My daughter was only a baby.”

“Yeah.” Len looked away. “Allie said you were looking for your daughter. Too bad. Hope you find her.”

Just as I was beginning to get angry with this woman, it occurred to me that she was acting. And as soon as the thought came to me, it was followed by others. Much of what she had shown me so far was false. She had not lied with her words. It was her manner that was a lie—filled with threads of wrongness. She was not the bored, indifferent person she wanted to seem to be. She was just trying to keep her distance. Strangers might be dangerous and cruel. Best to keep one’s distance.

Problem was, even though this girl had been treated very badly, she wasn’t distant. It wasn’t natural to her. It made her a little bit uncomfortable all the time—like an itch, and in her body language, she was communicating her discomfort to me. And, I decided, watching her, there was something else wrong.

“Shall we travel together?” I asked. “I usually travel as a man, by the way. I’m big enough and androgynous-looking enough to get away with it.”

“Fine with me.”

I looked at her, waiting.

She shrugged. “So we travel together. All right.”

I went on looking at her.

She shifted in her hard chair. “What’s the matter? What is it?”

I reached out and took her hand before she could flinch away. “I’m a sharer,” I said. “And so are you.”

She snatched her hand away and glared at me. “For godsake! We’re only traveling together. Maybe not even that. Keep your accusations to yourself!”

“That’s the kind of secret that gets companion travelers killed. If you’re still alive, it’s obvious that you can handle sudden, unexpected pain. But believe me, two sharers traveling together need to know how to help one another.”

She got up and ran out of the room.

I looked after her, wondering whether she would come back. I didn’t care whether or not she did, but the strength of her reaction surprised me. Back at Acorn, people were always surprised to be recognized as sharers when they came to us. But once they were recognized, and no one hurt them, they were all right. I never identified another sharer without identifying myself. And most of the ones I did identify realized that sharers do need to learn to manage without crippling one another. Male sharers were touchy—resenting their extra vulnerability more than females seemed to, but none of them, male or female, had just turned and run away.

Well, Belen Ross had been rich, if not loved. She had been protected from the world even better than I had been down in Robledo. She had learned that the people within the walls of her father’s compound were of one kind, and those outside were of another. She had learned that she had to protect herself from that other kind. One must never let them see weakness. Perhaps that was it. If so, she wouldn’t come back. She would get her things and leave the area as

soon as she could. She would not stay where someone knew her dangerous secret.

All this happened on Friday. I didn't see Len again until yesterday—Saturday. I met with a few of the men who had provided me with useful information before—in particular with those who had been to Portland. I bought them drinks and listened to what they had to say, then I left them and bought maps of northern California and Oregon. I bought dried fruit, beans, cornmeal, almonds, sunflower seeds, supplies for my first aid kit, and ammunition for my rifle and my handgun. I bought these things from the George's even though their prices are higher than those of most stores in Eureka. I wouldn't be going to Eureka again soon. I would go inland for a while toward Interstate 5. I might even travel along I-5 if it seemed wise once I'd gotten there and had a look at it. In some parts of California, I-5 has become frightening and dangerous—or at least it was back in '27 when I walked it for a few miles. In any case, I-5 would take me right into Portland. If I circled back to the coast and walked up U.S. 101, I'd have a longer walk. And U.S. 101 looked lonelier. There were fewer towns, smaller towns.

"Big towns are good," a man from Salem, Oregon, had told me. "You can be anonymous. Small towns can be mean and suspicious when strangers show up. If they just had a robbery or something, they might pull you in, put a collar on you, or lock you up or even shoot you. Big cities are bad news. They chew you up and spit you out in pieces. You're nobody, and if you die in the gutter, nobody cares but the sanitation department. Maybe not even them."

"You gotta think about there's still a war on," a man from Bakersfield, California, had said. "It could flare back

up anytime, no matter how much they talk peace. Nobody knows what more war's going to mean to people walking on the highway. More guns, I guess. More crazy guys, more guys who don't know how to do anything but kill people."

He was probably right. He had, as he put it, "been bummin' around for more than 20 years," and he was still around. That alone made his opinion worth something. He told me he had had no trouble going back and forth to Portland, even last year during the war, and that was good news. There were fewer people on the road than there had been back in the 2020s, but more than just before the war. I remember when I hoped that fewer travelers were a sign that things were getting better. I suppose things are getting better for some people.

Len came to me just as I finished my purchases at George's. Without a word, she helped me carry my stuff back to Allie's room, where, in continuing silence, she watched while I packed it. She couldn't really help with that.

"Your pack ready?" I asked her.

She shook her head.

"Go get it ready."

She caught my arm and waited until she had my full attention. "First tell me how you knew," she said. "I've never had anyone spot me like that."

I drew a long breath. "You're what, 19?"

"Yes."

"And you've never spotted anyone?"

She shook her head again. "I had just about decided that there weren't any others. I thought the ones who let themselves be discovered were collared or killed. I've been terrified that someone would notice. And then you did. I almost left without you."

“I thought you might, but there didn’t seem to be anything I could say to you that wouldn’t upset you even more.”

“And you really are….You really…have it too?”

“I’m a sharer, yes.” I stared past her for a moment. “One of the best days of my life was when I realized that my daughter probably wasn’t. You can’t be 100 percent sure with babies, but I don’t believe that she was. And I had a friend who had four sharer kids. He said he didn’t think she was either.” And where were Gray Mora’s children now? What was happening to the lost little boys? Could there be anyone more vulnerable than little male sharers at the mercy of both men and other boys?

“Four sharer children?” Len demanded. “Four?”

I nodded.

“I think…I think my life would have been so different if my brother had been a sharer, too, instead of his normal, perfect self,” Len said. “It was as though I had leprosy and he didn’t. You know what I mean? There was an idea once that people who had leprosy were unclean and God didn’t much like them.”

I nodded. “Who was the Paracetco addict in your family?”

“They both were—both of my parents.”

“Oh, my. And you were the evidence of their misbehavior, the constant reminder. I suppose they couldn’t forgive you for that.”

She thought about that for a while. “You’re right. People do blame you for the things they do to you. The men who kidnapped me blamed me because they had gone to so much trouble to get me, then there was no ransom. I don’t remember how many times they hit me for that—as though it were all my fault.”

“These days, projecting blame is almost an art form.”

“You still haven’t told me how you knew.”

“Your body language. Everything about you. If you have a chance to meet others, you’ll begin to recognize them. It just takes practice.”

“Some people think sharing is a power—like some kind of extrasensory perception.”

I shrugged. “You and I know it isn’t.”

She began to look a little happier. “When do we leave?”

“Monday morning just before dawn. Don’t say anything about it to anyone.”

“Of course not!”

“Are you all right for supplies?”

In a different tone, she repeated, “Of course not. But I’ll be all right. I can take care of myself.”

“We’ll be traveling together for almost a month,” I said. “The idea is that we should take care of ourselves and of one another. What do you need?”

We sat together quiet for a while, and she wrestled in silence with her pride and her temper.

“It’s sometimes best to avoid towns,” I said. “Some towns fear and hate travelers. If they don’t arrest them or beat them, they chase them away. Sometimes at the end of the day, there are no towns within reach. And fasting and hiking don’t go well together. Now let’s go get you some supplies. I assume you stole the things you have now.”

“Thank you,” she said, “for assuming that.”

I laughed and heard bitterness in my own laughter. “We do what we have to do to live. But don’t steal while you’re with me.” I let my voice harden a little. “And don’t steal from me.”

“You’ll take my word that I won’t?”

“Will you give me your word?”

She looked down her long, thin nose at me. “You enjoy telling people what to do, don’t you?”

I shrugged. “I like living, and I like being free. And you and I need to be able to trust one another.” I watched her now, needing to see all that there was to be seen.

“I know,” she said. “It’s just that…I’ve always had things. I used to give clothing, shoes, food, things like that to the families of our servants at Christmas. About five years ago, my mother stopped seeing anyone except members of the family, and my father got into the habit of leaving the house servants to me. Now I’m poorer than our servants were. *And, yes, everything I have, I’ve stolen.* I was so idealistic when I was at home. I wouldn’t steal anything. Now I feel moral because I’m a thief instead of a prostitute.”

“While we’re together, you won’t be either.”

“…all right.”

And I let myself relax a little. She seemed to mean it. “Let’s go get what you need, then. Come on.”

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 13, 2035

We’re on our way and we’ve had no trouble. Len asked me whether I had anything to read when we stopped last night, and I handed her one of my two remaining copies of *The First Book of the Living.* We’re not rushing and the days are long, so we don’t have to push on until it’s too dark to read.

We’ve traveled south to a state highway that will take us inland to I-5. Len gave no trouble about this. She did ask, “Why not walk right up the coast?”

“I want to avoid Eureka,” I told her. “I was mugged last time I was there.”

She made a grim face, then nodded. “God, I hope we

can avoid that kind of thing."

"The best way to avoid it is to be ready for it," I said. "Accept the reality that it might happen, and keep your eyes and ears open."

"I know."

She's a good traveler. She complains, but she's willing to keep her share of the watches. One of the scary things about being alone is having no one to watch while you sleep. You have to sleep on your belongings, using them as a pillow or at least keeping them in your sleepsack with you, or someone will make off with them. The violent thieves are the ones who present the most obvious and immediate danger, but sneak thieves can hurt you. For one thing, they can force you to join them. If they steal your money or if you don't have enough money to replace the essentials they've stolen, then you have to steal to survive. My experience with collars has made me a very reluctant thief—not that I was ever an eager one.

Anyway, Len is a good traveling companion. And she's an avid reader with an active mind. She says one of the things she misses most about home is computer access to the libraries of the world. She's well read. She rushed through *Earthseed: The First Book of the Living* in one evening. Problem is, it wasn't intended to be rushed through.

"I know you wrote this book," she said when she'd finished it—a couple of hours ago. "Allie told me you wrote a book about something called Earthseed. Is this your real name? Lauren Oya Olamina?"

I nodded. It didn't matter that she knew. We've bedded down off the road, between of a pair of hills where we can have some privacy. We're still in country that I know—hills, scattered ranches, small communities, stands of young trees,

open ground. Nice country. We walked through it many times from Acorn. It's less populated than it should be because during the worst years of the 2020s, a lot of people were burned out, robbed, abducted, or just killed. The small communities were vulnerable and the gangs swept over them like locusts. Many of the survivors looked for less crime-ridden places to live—places like Canada, Alaska, and Russia. That's why so much was abandoned to the likes of us when we hunted building materials, useful plants, and old tools. Now, though, the land's familiarity doesn't comfort me. Then Len asks me a familiar question, and that is comforting, somehow.

"Why did you write this?"

"Because it's true," I answered, and from then until the time she lay down to sleep, we talked about Earthseed and what it meant, what it could mean and how anyone could ever accept it even if they happened to hear about it. She doesn't sneer, but she doesn't understand yet either. I find that I look forward to teaching her.

SUNDAY, JUNE 17, 2035

We're taking the day off. We're in Redding—a little west of Redding in a park, really. Redding is a sizable city. We've made camp, for once in a place where people are supposed to camp, and we're eating heavy, tasty food bought in town. We've also had a chance to bathe and do our laundry. It always puts me in a better mood not to stink and not to have to endure the body odor of my companion. Somehow, no matter how awful I smell, I can still smell other people.

We've had a hot stew of potatoes, vegetables, and jerked beef with a topping of lovely Cheddar cheese. It turns

out that Len can't cook. She says her mother could but never did. Never had to. Servants did the cooking, the cleaning, repairing things. Teachers were hired for Len and her brother—mostly to guide their use of the computer courses and to be sure they did the work they were supposed to do. Their father, their computer connections, and their older servants provided them with most of what they knew about the world. Ordinary living skills like cooking and sewing were never on the agenda.

"What did your mother do?" I asked.

Len shrugged. "Nothing, really. She lived in her virtual room—her own private fantasy universe. That room could take her anywhere, so why should she ever come out? She was getting fat and losing her physical and mental health, but her v-room was all she cared about."

I frowned. "I've heard of that kind of thing—people being hooked on Dreamasks or on virtual-world fantasies. I don't know anything about it, though."

"What is there to know? Dreamasks are nothing—cheap kid's toys. Really limited. In that room she could go anywhere, be anyone, be with anyone. It was like a womb with an imagination. She could visit fourteenth-century China, present-day Argentina, Greenland in any imagined distant future, or one of the distant worlds circling Alpha Centauri. You name it, she could create some version of it. Or she could visit her friends, real and imaginary. Her real friends were other wealthy, idle people—mostly women and children. They were as addicted to their v-rooms as she was to hers. If her real friends didn't indulge her as much as she wanted them to, she just created more obliging versions of them. By the time I was abducted, I didn't know whether she really had contact with any flesh-and-blood people anymore. She couldn't stand real people with real egos of

their own."

I thought about this. It was worse than anything I had heard about this particular addiction. "What about food?" I asked. "What about bathing or just going to the bathroom?"

"She used to come out for meals. She had her own bathroom. All by itself, it was big as my bedroom. Then she began to have all her meals sent in. After that, there were whole months when I didn't see her. Even when I took her meals in myself, I had to just leave them. She was in the v-bubble inside the room, and I couldn't even see her. If I went into the bubble—you could just walk into it—she would scream at me. I wasn't part of her perfect fantasy life. My brother, on the other hand, was. He got to visit her once or twice a week and share in her fantasies. Nice, isn't it."

I sighed. "Didn't your father mind any of this? Didn't he try to help her—or you?"

"He was busy making money and screwing the maids and their children—some of whom were also his children. He wasn't cut off from the outside, but he had his own fantasy life." She hesitated. "Do I seem normal to you?"

I couldn't help seeing where she was going with that. "We're survivors, Len. You are. I am. Most of Georgetown is. All of Acorn was. We've been slammed around in all kinds of ways. We're all wounded. We're healing as best we can. And, no, we're not normal. Normal people wouldn't have survived what we've survived. If we were normal we'd be dead."

That made her cry. I just held her. No doubt she had been repressing far too much in recent years. When had anyone last held her and let her cry? I held her. After a while, she lay down, and I thought she was falling asleep. Then she spoke.

"If God is Change, then…then who loves us? Who cares

about us? Who cares for us?"

"We care for one another," I said. "We care for ourselves and one another." And I quoted,

"Kindness eases Change.
Love quiets fear."

At that, she surprised me. She said, "Yes, I liked that one." And she finished the quote:

"And a sweet and powerful
Positive obsession
Blunts pain,
Diverts rage,
And engages each of us
In the greatest,
The most intense
Of our chosen struggles."

"But I have no obsession, positive or otherwise. I have nothing."

"Alaska?" I said.

"I don't know what else to do, where else to go."

"If you get there, what will you do? Go back to being your parents' housekeeper?"

She glanced at me. "I don't know whether they would let me. I might never make it over the borders anyway, especially with the war. Border guards will probably shoot me." She said this with no fear, no passion, no feeling at all. She was telling me that she was committing a kind of suicide. She wasn't out to kill herself, but she was going to arrange for others to kill her—because she didn't know

what else to do. Because no one loved her or needed her for anything at all. From her parents to her abductors, people were willing to use her and discard her, but she mattered to no one. Not even to herself. Yet she had kept herself alive through hell. Did she struggle for life only out of habit, or because some part of her still hoped that there was something worth living for?

She can't be allowed to go off to be shot by thugs, border guards, or soldiers. I can't let her do that. And, I think, she wants to be stopped. She won't ask to be, and she will fight for her own self-destructive way. People are like that. But I must think about what she can do instead of dying—what she should be doing. I must think about what she can do for Earthseed, and what it can do for her.

TWENTY

From EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING

Are you Earthseed?
Do you believe?
Belief will not save you.
Only actions
Guided and shaped
By belief and knowledge
Will save you.
Belief
Initiates and guides action—
Or it does nothing.

WHEN I WAS 19, I met my Uncle Marc.

He was, by then, the Reverend Marcos Duran, a slight, still-beautiful middle-aged man who had become in English and in Spanish the best-known minister of the Church of Christian America. There was even some talk of his running for president, although he seemed uncomfortable about this. By then, though, the Church was just one more Protestant denomination. Andrew Steele Jarret had been dead for years, and the Church had gone from being an institution that everyone knew about and either loved or feared to being a smaller, somewhat defensive organization with much to answer for and few answers.

I had left home. Even though a girl who left home unmarried was seen by church members as almost a prostitute, I left as soon as I was 18.

“If you go,” Kayce said, “don’t come back. This is a decent, God-fearing house. You will not bring your trash and your sin back here!”

I had gotten a job caring for children in a household where the father had died. I had deliberately looked for a job that did not put me at the mercy of another man—a man who might be like Madison, or worse than Madison. The pay was room, board, and a tiny salary. I believed I had clothing and books enough to get me through a few years of working there, helping to raise another woman’s children while she worked in public relations for a big agribusiness company. I had met the kids—two girls and a boy—and I liked them. I believed that I could do this work and save my salary so that when I left, I would have enough money to begin a small business—a small café, perhaps—of my own. I had no grand hopes. I only wanted to get away from the Alexanders who had become more and more intolerable.

There was no love in the Alexander house. There was only the habit of being together, and, I suppose, the fear of even greater loneliness. And there was the Church—the habit of Church with its Bible class, men’s and women’s missionary groups, charity work, and choir practice. I had joined the young people’s choir to get away from Madison. As it happened, the choir provided relief in three ways. First, I discovered that I really liked to sing. I was so shy at first that I could hardly open my mouth, but once I got into the songs, lost myself in them, I loved it. Second, choir practice was one more excuse that I could use to get out of the house. Third, singing in the choir was a way to avoid having to sit next to Madison in church. It was a way to

avoid his nasty, moist little hands. He used to feel me up in church. He really did that. We would sit down with Kayce between us, then he would get up to go to the men's room and come back and sit next to me with his coat or his jacket on his lap to hide his touching me.

I believe Kayce realized what was happening. In the days before I left, we were enemies, she and I. Neither of us said anything about Madison. We just spent a lot of time hating one another. We didn't talk unless we had to. Any talk that we couldn't avoid might become a screaming fight. Then she'd call me a little whore, an ungrateful little bastard, a heathen witch….During my seventeenth year, I don't think she and I ever had anything like a conversation.

Anyway, I joined the choir. And I discovered that I had a big alto voice that people enjoyed hearing. I even discovered that church wasn't so bad if I didn't have to sit between the devil and the deep blue sea.

Because of my singing, I tried to stay with the church after I moved out of Kayce and Madison's house. I did try. But I couldn't do it.

The rumors began at once: I was having sex with any number of men. I was pregnant. I had had an abortion. I had cursed God and joined my real mother in a heathen cult. I was spreading lies about Madison….People I had grown up with, people I had thought of as friends, stopped speaking to me. Men who had paid no attention to me while I was at home now began to edge up to me with whispered invitations and unwanted little touches, and then angry denunciations when I wouldn't give them what they now seemed to think they had a right to get from me.

I couldn't take it. A few months after I left home, I

left the church. That was all right with my employer. She didn't go to church. She had been raised a Unitarian, but now seemed to have no religious interests. She liked to spend Sundays with her kids. Sunday was my day off. What I did with it was up to me.

But to my amazement, I missed my adoptive parents. I missed the church. I missed the life I had grown up with. I missed everything. And I was so lonely. I dragged myself through my days. Sometimes I barely wanted to be alive.

Then I heard that Reverend Marcos Duran was coming to town, that he would be preaching at the First Christian American Church of Seattle. That was the big church, not our little neighborhood thing. The moment I read that Reverend Duran was coming, I knew I would go to see him. I knew what a great preacher he was. I had disks of him preaching to thousands in great CA cathedrals on the Gulf Coast and in Washington, D.C. He had a big church of his own in New York. He was young to be so successful, and I had quite a crush on him. God, he was beautiful. And unlike every other preacher I knew of, he wasn't married. That must have been rough. Every woman would be after him. Other ministers would pressure him to get married, accept adult responsibilities, family responsibilities. Men would look at his handsome face and think he was a homosexual. Was he? I had heard rumors. But then, I knew about rumors.

I camped out all night outside the big church to make sure that I would be able to get in for services. As soon as I was off duty on Saturday night, I took a blanket roll, some sandwiches, and a bottle of water,

and went to get a place outside the church. I wasn't the only one. Even though services would be broadcast free, there were dozens of people camped around the church when I got there. More kept coming. We were mostly women and girls sleeping out that night—not that anyone slept much. There were some men either trying to get close to the women or looking as though they hoped to get close to Reverend Duran. But there was nothing blatant. We sang and talked and laughed. I had a great time. These people were all strangers to me, and I had a great time with them. They liked my voice and got me to sing some solos. Doing that was still hard for me, but I had done it in church, so I just put myself back in church mentally. Then I was into the singing, and the faces of the others told me they were into my songs.

And then a woman came out of the big, handsome house near the church and made straight for me. I stopped singing because it occurred to me suddenly that I was disturbing people. It was late. We were having something very like a party in the street and on the steps of the church. None of us had even thought that we might be keeping people awake. I just stopped singing in the middle of a word and everyone stared at me, then at the woman striding toward me. She was a light-skinned Black woman with red hair and freckles—a plump, middle-aged woman, wearing a long green caftan. She came right up to me as though I were the only one there.

"Would your name be Asha Alexander?" she asked.

I nodded. "Yes, ma'am. I'm sorry if we disturbed you."

She put an envelope in my hand and smiled. "You

didn't disturb me, dear, you have a lovely voice. Read the note. I think you'll want to answer it."

The note said, "If your name is Asha Vere Alexander, I would like to speak with you. I believe I have information concerning your biological parents. Marcos Duran."

I stared at the red-haired woman's face in shock, and she smiled. "If you're interested, come with me," she said, and she turned and walked back toward her house.

I wasn't sure I should.

"What is it?" one of my new friends asked. She was sitting, wrapped in her blankets on the church steps, looking from me to the departing red-haired woman. They were all looking from me to the woman.

"I don't know," I said. "Family stuff." And I ran after the woman.

And he was there, Marcos Duran, in that big house. The house was the home of the minister of the First Church. The red-haired woman was the minister's wife. God, Reverend Duran was even more beautiful in person than he was on the disks. He was an amazing-looking man.

"I've been watching you and your friends and listening to your singing," he said. "I thought I recognized you. Your adoptive parents are Kayce and Madison Alexander." It wasn't a question. He was looking at me as though he knew me, as though he were honestly glad to see me.

I nodded.

He smiled—a sad kind of smile. "Well, I think we may be related. We can do a gene check later if you like, but I believe your mother was my half-sister. She

and your father are dead now." He paused, gave me an odd, uncertain look. "I'm sorry to have to tell you that. They were good people. I thought you should know about them if you wanted to."

"You're sure they're dead?" I asked.

He nodded and said again, "I'm sorry."

I thought about this, and didn't know what to feel. My parents were dead. Well, I had thought they might be, in spite of my fantasies. But…but all of a sudden, I had an uncle. All of a sudden one of the best-known men in the country was my uncle.

"Would you like to hear about your parents?" he asked.

"Yes!" I said. "Yes, please. I want to hear everything."

So he began to tell me. As I recall it now, he talked about my mother as a girl with four younger brothers to ride herd on, about Robledo being wiped out, about Acorn. Not until he began to talk about Acorn did he begin to lie. Acorn, he said, was a small mountain community—a real community, not a squatter settlement. But he said nothing about Earthseed, Acorn's religion. Acorn was destroyed like Robledo, he continued. My parents met there, married there, and were killed there. I was found crying in the ruins of the community.

He hadn't found out about all this until a couple of years later, and by then, I had a home and new parents —good Christian Americans, he believed. He had kept track of me, always meaning to speak to me when I was older, let me know my history, let me know that I still had a living member of my biological family.

"You look like her," he said to me. "You look so

much like her, I can't believe it. And your voice is like hers. When I heard you singing out there, I had to get up and go look."

He looked at me with something like amazement, then turned and wiped away a tear.

I wanted to touch him, comfort him. That was odd, because I didn't like touching people. I had been too much alone in my life. Kayce didn't like to touch people —or at least she didn't like to touch me. She always said it was too hot or she was too busy or something. She acted as though hugging or kissing me would somehow have been *nasty*. And of course, being touched by Madison's moist little hands *was* nasty. But this man, my uncle…*my uncle!*…made me want to reach out to him. I believed everything he told me. It never occurred to me not to. I was awed, flattered, confused, almost in tears.

I begged him to tell me more about my parents. I knew nothing, and I was hungry for any information he could give me. He spent a lot of time with me, answering my questions and putting me at my ease. The pastor and his red-haired wife put me up for what was left of the night. And all of a sudden, I had family.

My mother had blundered through the first few years of her life, knowing early what she wanted to do, but not knowing how to do it, improvising as she went along. She recruited the people of Acorn because she came to believe that she could accomplish her purpose by creating Earthseed communities where children would grow up learning the "truths" of Earthseed and go on to shape the human future according to those "truths." This was her first attempt, as she put it, to plant seeds.

But she had the bad luck to begin her work at almost the same time that Andrew Steele Jarret began his, and he was, at least in the short term, much the stronger. Her only good luck was that he was so much stronger than she was that he never noticed her. His fanatical Crusaders, very much one of the fingers of his hand, utterly destroyed her first effort, but there's no record at all of her ever having come to Jarret's attention. She was just an ant that he happened to step on.

If she had been anything more than that, she would not have survived.

It is interesting, however, to see that after Acorn, she seemed to lose her direction until she found Belen Ross. She had written about wanting to find me, then begin her Earthseed work again—but begin it how? By establishing another Acorn? One even more hidden away and low-key?

Surely, a new Acorn would be just as vulnerable as the first one. One gesture of authority could erase it completely. What then? She needed a different idea, and, in fact, she had one. She knew that she had to teach teachers. Gathering families had not worked. She had to gather single people, or at least independent people—people who would learn from her, then scatter to preach and teach as, in effect, her disciples. Instead, she was still, reflexively, looking for me. I'm not sure there was much left of that search but reflex by the time Belen Ross came into the picture. I've wondered whether Allison Gilchrist—Allie—guessed this and brought her together with Len just to shake her up.

FROM *The Journals of Lauren Oya Olamina*

There are three of us now, in a way. We've had an interesting time becoming three, and I'm not altogether comfortable with the way
I brought it about. It isn't exactly what I expected to do, but I've found it interesting. We're on the road again, just north of a shiny, new company town called Hobartville. We bought supplies outside of the walls of Hobartville at the inevitable squatter settlement. Then we circled around the town and moved on. It's good to be moving again. We've been three days in one place.

Until three days ago, we had been walking and making no lingering contacts on the road—which is an odd way for me to behave. Back in '27 when I was walking from Los Angeles to Humboldt County, I gathered people, gathered a small community. I thought then that Earthseed would be born through small, cooperating communities. Once Acorn was established, I invited others to join us. This time, I haven't felt that I could invite anyone other than Len to join me.

This time, after all, I was only going to Portland to look for my daughter and to get my brother to help me find her whether he wanted to or not.

And was that any more realistic a goal than Len's intention to walk to Alaska to rejoin her family? It was, perhaps less suicidal, but…no more sensible.

It is my uneasiness, my fear that perhaps this is true, that has kept me from reaching out to people. I've fed a few ragged parent-child groups because it's hard for me to see hungry children and do nothing at all. Yet I couldn't do much. What's a meal, after all? With Acorn, I had done more. With Earthseed, I had hoped to do much more. So

much more….I still have hopes. Even during the 17 months of Camp Christian, I never forgot Earthseed, although there were times when I thought I might not survive to teach it or use it to shape our future.

But all I've been able to do on this trip is to feed a mother and child here, a father and child there, then send them on their ways. They don't always want to go.

"How do you know they won't lie in wait and rob us later?" Len asked as we tramped along I-5 after leaving a father and his two small, ragged boys eating what I suspected was their first good meal in some time.

"I don't know," I said. "It's unlikely, but it could happen."

"Then why take the chance?"

I looked at her. She met my eyes for a second, then looked away. "I know," she said in a voice I could hardly hear. "But what good is a meal? I mean, they'll be hungry again soon."

"Yes," I said. "Jarret would be easier to take if he cared half as much about children's bodies and minds as he pretends to care about their souls."

"My father voted for him," she said.

"I'm not surprised."

"My father said he would bring order and stability, get the country back on its feet again. I remember that. He got my mother to vote for him too, not that she cared. She would have voted for the man in the moon if he had told her to, just so he would let her alone. I was still living at home during the '32 election. I had never been outside our walls. I thought my father must know what he was talking about, so I was for Jarret, too. I was too young to vote, though, so it didn't matter. All the adult servants voted for him. My father stood by the only phone in the house that

servants were allowed to use. He watched as their finger and retinal prints were scanned in. Then he watched them vote."

"I wonder whether it was your abduction that made your father give up on Jarret."

"Give up on him?"

"On him and on the United States. He's left the country, after all."

After a moment, she nodded. "Yes. Although I'm still having trouble thinking of Alaska as a foreign country. I guess that should be easy now, since the war. But it doesn't matter. None of this matters. I mean, those people—that man and his kids who you just fed—they matter, but no one cares about them. Those kids are the future if they don't starve to death. But if they manage to grow up, what kind of men will they be?"

"That's what Earthseed was about," I said. "I wanted us to understand what we could be, what we could do. I wanted to give us a focus, a goal, something big enough, complex enough, difficult enough, and in the end, radical enough to make us become more than we ever have been. We keep falling into the same ditches, you know? I mean, we learn more and more about the physical universe, more about our own bodies, more technology, but somehow, down through history, we go on building empires of one kind or another, then destroying them in one way or another. We go on having stupid wars that we justify and get passionate about, but in the end, all they do is kill huge numbers of people, maim others, impoverish still more, spread disease and hunger, and set the stage for the next war. And when we look at all of that in history, we just shrug our shoulders and say, well, that's the way things are. That's the way things always have been."

“It is,” Len said.

“It is,” I repeated. “There seem to be solid biological reasons why we are the way we are. If there weren’t, the cycles wouldn’t keep replaying. The human species is a kind of animal, of course. But we can do something no other animal species has ever had the option to do. We can choose: We can go on building and destroying until we either destroy ourselves or destroy the ability of our world to sustain us. Or we can make something more of ourselves. We can grow up. We can leave the nest. We can fulfill the Destiny, make homes for ourselves among the stars, and become some combination of what we want to become and whatever our new environments challenge us to become. Our new worlds will remake us as we remake them. And some of the new people who emerge from all this will develop new ways to cope. They’ll have to. That will break the old cycle, even if it’s only to begin a new one, a different one.

“Earthseed is about preparing to fulfill the Destiny. It’s about learning to live in partnership with one another in small communities, and at the same time, working out a sustainable partnership with our environment. It’s about treating education and adaptability as the absolute essentials that they are. It’s…” I glanced at Len, caught a little smile on her face, and wound down. “It’s about a lot more than that,” I said. “But those are the bones.”

“Makes a strange sermon.”

“I know.”

“You need to do what Jarret does.”

“What!” I demanded, not wanting to do anything Jarret did.

“Focus on what people want and tell them how your system will help them get it. Tell folksy stories that

illustrate your points and promise the moon and stars—literally in your case. Why should people want to go to the stars, anyway? It will cost a lot of money, and time. It will force us to create whole new technologies. And I doubt that anyone who's alive when the effort starts will live to see the end of it. Some scientists might like it. It will give them the chance to work on their pet projects. And some people might think it's a great adventure, but no one's going to want to pay for it."

Now I smiled. "Exactly. I've been saying things like that for years. Some people might want to do it for the sake of their children—to give them the chance to begin again and do things right this time. But that idea alone won't do it. It won't bring in enough people, money, or persistence. Fulfilling the Destiny is a long-term, expensive, uncertain project—or rather it's hundreds of projects. Maybe thousands. And with no guarantees of anything. Politicians, on the other hand, are short-term thinkers, opportunists, sometimes with consciences, but opportunists nevertheless. Business people are hungry for profit, short- and long-term. The truth is, preparing for interstellar travel and then sending out ships filled with colonists is bound to be a job so long, thankless, expensive, and difficult that I suspect that only a religion could do it. A lot of people will find ways to make money from it. That might get things started. But it will take something as essentially human and as essentially irrational as religion to keep them focused and keep it going—for generations if it takes generations. I suspect it will. You see, I have thought about this."

Len thought about it herself for a while, then said, "If that's what you believe, why don't you tell people to go to the stars because that's what God wants them to do—and don't start explaining to me that your God doesn't want

anything. I understand that. But most people won't understand it."

"The people of Acorn did."

"And where are they?"

That hurt like a punch in the face. "No one knows better than I do how miserably I failed my people," I said.

Len looked away, embarrassed. "I didn't mean it that way," she said. "I'm sorry. I just mean that what you're saying just isn't something people are going to understand and get enthusiastic about—at least not quickly. Did people join Acorn for Earthseed or in the hope of feeding their kids?"

I sighed and nodded. "They did it to feed their kids and to live in a community that didn't look down on them for being poor or enslave them when they were vulnerable. It took some of the adults years to accept Earthseed. The kids got into it right away, though. I thought the kids would be the missionary teachers."

"Maybe they would have been, if they'd had the chance. But that way didn't work. What are you going to do now?"

"With Jarret's Crusaders still running loose? I don't know." This wasn't entirely true. I did have some ideas, but I wanted to hear what Len had to say. She had been interesting and thoughtful so far.

"You're good at talking to people," she said. "They like you. Hell, they trust you. Why can't you just preach to them like any other minister? Preach the way Jarret does. Have you ever heard any of his speeches? Most of them are sermons. Newspeople have a hard time opposing anything he wants because he's always on God's side. Guess whose side that puts them on?"

"And you think I should do that?"

“Of course you should do that if you believe what you say.”

“I’m not a demagogue.”

“That’s too bad. That leaves the field to people who are demagogues—to the Jarrets of the world. And there have always been Jarrets. Probably there always will be.”

We walked in silence for a while, then I said, “What about you?”

“What do you mean? You know where I’m going.”

“Stay with me. Go somewhere else.”

“You’re going to Oregon to see your brother and find your child.”

“Yes. And I’m also going to make Earthseed what it should be—the way we humans finally manage to grow up.”

“You intend to try again?”

“I don’t really have any choice. Earthseed isn’t just what I believe. It’s who I am. It’s why I exist.”

“You say in your book that we don’t have purpose, but potential.”

I smiled. She had a photographic memory or nearly so. But she wasn’t above using it unfairly to win an argument.

I quoted,

“We are born
Not with purpose,
But with potential.”

“We choose our purpose,” I said. “I chose mine before I was old enough to know any better—or it chose me. Purpose is essential. Without it, we drift.”

“Purpose,” she said, and with an air of showing off, she quoted:

“Purpose
Unifies us:
It focuses our dreams,
Guides our plans,
Strengthens our efforts.
Purpose
Defines us,
Shapes us,
And offers us
Greatness.”

She sighed. “Sounds wonderful. But then a lot of things sound wonderful. What are you going to do?”

“I’m no Jarret,” I said, “but you’re probably right about the need to simplify and focus my message. You can help me do that.”

“Why should I?”

“Because it will keep you alive.”

She looked away again. After a long silence, she said with great bitterness, “What makes you think I want to be kept alive?”

“I know you do. But if you stick with me, you’ll have to prove it.”

“What?”

“As a matter of fact, if you stick with me, you’ll have all you can do to stay alive. Ideas like those in Earthseed aren’t going to be popular for a while. Jarret wouldn’t like them if he knew about them.”

“If you have any sense, you won’t draw attention to yourself. Not now.”

“I don’t intend to draw huge crowds or get on the nets. Not until Jarret has worn out his welcome, anyway. I do intend to reach out to people again.”

“How?”

And I knew. I had been wondering as we spoke, scrambling for ideas. Len’s comments had helped focus me. So had my own recent experience. “I’ll reach people in their homes,” I said. “There’s nothing new about door-to-door missionaries in small cities like Eureka, for instance. In L.A. you couldn’t do it. We may not be able to do it in Portland either. Portland’s gotten so big. But on the way there, and in the larger towns around Portland, it might work. Small cities and big towns. People in very large cities and the very small towns can be—will be—suspicious and vicious.”

“Free towns only, I assume,” Len said.

“Of course. If I managed to get into a company town, I might be collared for vagrancy. That can be a life sentence. They just keep charging you more to live than they pay you for your labor, and you never get out of debt.”

“So I’ve heard. You want to just knock on people’s doors and ask to tell them about Earthseed? I hear the Jehovah’s Witnesses do that. Or they did it. I’m not sure they still do.”

“It’s gotten more dangerous.” I said. “But other people did it too. The Mormons and some other lesser-known groups.”

“Christian groups.”

“I know.” I thought for a moment. “Did you know I was 18 when I began collecting people and establishing Acorn? Eighteen. A year younger than you are now.”

“I know. Allie told me.”

“People followed me, though,” I continued. “And they didn’t only do it because they were convinced that I could help them get what they wanted. They followed me because I seemed to be going somewhere. They had no purpose beyond survival. Get a job. Eat. Get a room somewhere.

Exist. But I wanted more than that for myself and for my people, and I meant to have it. They wanted more too, but they didn't think they could have it. They weren't even sure what 'it' was."

"Weren't you wonderful?" Len murmured.

"Don't be an idiot," I said. "Those people were willing to follow an 18-year-old girl because she seemed to be going somewhere, seemed to know where she was going. People elected Jarret because he seemed to know where he was going too. Even rich people like your dad are desperate for someone who seems to know where they're going."

"Dad wanted someone who would protect his investments and keep the poor people in their places."

"And when he realized that Jarret either couldn't or wouldn't do either, he left the country. Other people will turn their backs on Jarret, too, in different ways. But they'll still want to follow people who seem to know where they're going."

"You?"

I sighed. "Perhaps. More likely, though, it will be people I've taught. I don't really have the skills that will be needed. Also, I don't know how long it will take to make Earthseed a way of life and the Destiny a goal that much of humanity struggles to achieve. I'm afraid that alone might take my lifetime and yours. It won't be quick. But we'll be the ones who plant the first seeds, you and I."

Len pushed her black hair away from her face. "I don't believe in Earthseed. I don't believe in any of this. It's just a lot of simplistic nonsense. You'll get killed knocking on the doors of strangers, and that will be the end of it."

"That could happen."

"I want no part of it."

"Yes, you do. If you live, you'll accomplish more that's

good and important than anyone you've ever known. If you die, you'll die trying to accomplish it."

"I said I want no part of it. It's ridiculous. It's impossible."

"And you have more important things to do?"

Silence.

We didn't talk anymore until we came to a road leading off into the hills. I turned to follow it, ignoring Len's questions. Where was I going? I didn't know at all. Perhaps I would just have a look at what lay up the road, then turn back to the highway. Perhaps not.

Hidden away in the hills, there was a large, two-story wooden farmhouse set back off the road. It was much in need of paint. It had once been white. Now it was gray. Alongside it, a woman was weeding her large vegetable garden. Without telling Len what I meant to do, I walked off the road, went to her, and asked if we could do her weeding for a meal.

"We'll do a good job," I said. "We'll satisfy you, or no food."

She stared at us both with fear and suspicion. She seemed to be alone, but might not be. We were clearly armed, but offering no threat. I smiled. "Just a few sandwiches would be awfully welcome," I said. "We'll work hard for them." I was dressed in loose clothing as a man. My hair was cut short. Len tells me I don't make a bad-looking man. We were both reasonably clean.

The woman smiled in spite of herself—a tentative little smile. "Do you think you can tell the weeds from the vegetables?" she asked.

I laughed and said, "Yes, ma'am." In my sleep, I thought. But Len was another matter. She had never done any gardening at all. Her father hired people to work in

their gardens and orchards. She had thin, soft, uncallused hands and no knowledge of plants. I told her to watch me for a while. I pointed out the carrots, the various green vegetables, the herbs, then set her weeding the herbs on hands and knees. She'd have more control over what she pulled that way. I depended on her memory and her good sense. If she was angry with me, she would let me know about it later. Raging at people in public wasn't her style. In fact, we had plenty of food in our packs, and we weren't yet low on money. But I wanted to begin at once to reach out to people. Why not stop for a day on our way to Portland and leave a few words behind in this old gray house? It was good practice, if nothing else.

We worked hard and got the garden cleaned up. Len muttered and complained, but I didn't get the impression that she was really suffering. In fact, she seemed interested in what she was doing and content to be doing it, although she complained about bugs and worms, about the way the weeds smelled, about the way the damp earth smelled, about getting dirty….

I realized that while Len had talked about experiences with her family and with the servants and experiences with her kidnappers and with living on her own, scavenging and stealing, she's never talked about working. She must have done some small jobs for food, but working seems still to be a novelty for her. I'll have to see that she gets more experience so that even if she decides to go off on her own, she'll be better able to take care of herself.

Later in the day, when we had finished the weeding, the woman—who told us her name was Nia Cortez—gave us a plate of three kinds of sandwiches. There was egg, toasted cheese, and ham. And there was a bowl of strawberries, a bowl of oranges, and a pitcher of lemonade sweetened with

honey. Nia sat with us on her side porch, and I got the impression that she was lonely, shy, and still more than a little afraid of us. What a solitary place the old house was, dropped amid grassy hills.

"This is beautiful country," I said. "I sketch a little. These rolling hills, blond grasses, and green trees make me want to sit drawing all day."

"You can draw?" Nia asked me with a little smile.

And I took my sketchpad from my pack and began to draw not the rolling hills but Nia's own plump, pleasant face. She was in her late forties or early fifties and had dark brown hair streaked with gray. Drawn back into a long, thick horsetail, it hung almost to her waist. Her plumpness had helped her avoid wrinkles, and her smooth skin was tanned a good even brown—a nice, uncomplicated face. Her eyes were as clear as a baby's, and the same dark brown as most of her hair. Drawing someone gives me an excellent excuse to study them and let myself feel what it seems to me that they feel. That's what sharing is, after all, and it comes to me whether I want it or not. I might as well use it. In a rough and not altogether dependable way, drawing a person helps me *become* that person and, to be honest, it helps me manipulate that person. Everything teaches.

She was lonely, Nia was. And she was taking an uncomfortable interest in me-as-a-man. To curb that interest, I turned to Len, who was watching everything with sharp, intelligent interest.

"Wrap up a couple of sandwiches for me, would you?" I asked her. "I'd like to finish this while the light is right."

Len gave me a sidelong glance and used paper napkins to wrap two sandwiches. Nia, on the other hand, looked at Len almost as though she had forgotten her. Then, in a moment of confusion, she looked down at her hands—tools

of work, those hands. She seemed more contained, more restrained when she looked at me again.

I didn't hurry with the drawing. I could have finished it much more quickly. But working on it, adding detail, gave me a chance to talk about Earthseed without seeming to proselytize. I quoted verses as though quoting any poetry to her until one verse caught her interest. That she could not conceal from me. To her credit, it was this verse:

"To shape God
With wisdom and forethought
To benefit your world,
Your people,
Your life.
Consider consequences.
Minimize harm.
Ask questions.
Seek answers.
Learn.
Teach."

She had once been a teacher in a public school in San Francisco. The school had closed 15 years after she began teaching. That was during the early twenties when so many public school systems around the country gave up the ghost and closed their doors. Even the pretense of having an educated populace was ending. Politicians shook their heads and said sadly that universal education was a failed experiment. Some companies began to educate the children of their workers at least well enough to enable them to become their next generation of workers. Company towns began then to come back into fashion. They offered security,

employment, and education. That was all very well, but the company that educated you owned you until you paid off the debt you owed them. You were an indentured person, and if they couldn't use you themselves, they could trade you off to another division of the company—or another company. You, like your education, became a commodity to be bought or sold.

There were still a few public school systems in the country, limping along, doing what they could, but these had more in common with city jails than with even the most mediocre private, religious, or company schools. It was the business of responsible parents to see to the education of their children, somehow. Those who did not were bad parents. It was to be hoped that social, legal, and religious pressures would sooner or later force even bad parents to do their duty toward their offspring.

"So," Nia said, "poor, semiliterate, and illiterate people became financially responsible for their children's elementary education. If they were alcoholics or addicts or prostitutes or if they had all they could do just to feed their kids and maybe keep some sort of roof over their heads, that was just too bad! And no one thought about what kind of society we were building with such stupid decisions. People who could afford to educate their children in private schools were glad to see the government finally stop wasting their tax money, educating other people's children. They seemed to think they lived on Mars. They imagined that a country filled with poor, uneducated, unemployable people somehow wouldn't hurt them!"

Len sighed. "That sounds like the way my dad thinks. I'm his punishment, I guess—not that he cares!"

Nia gave her a look of chilly interest. "What? Your father?"

Len explained, and I watched as, almost against her will, Nia thawed. “I see.” She sighed. “I suppose I could have wound up homeless myself, but my aunt and uncle owned this house and surrounding farmland outright. This is mother’s family home. I came to live here and care for them when my job ended. They were old and not doing well anymore. Even then they were renting the farmland to neighboring farmers. They left the house, the land, and the rest of their possessions to me when they died. I keep a garden, some chickens, goats, rabbits. I rent the land. I survive.”

I tried to ignore a sharp stab of envy and nostalgia.

Len said, “I like your garden.” She stared out at the long, neat rows of vegetables, fruits, and herbs.

“Do you?” Nia asked. “I heard you complaining out there.”

Len blushed, then looked at her hands. “I’ve never done that kind of thing before. I liked it, but it was hard work.”

I smiled. “She’s game, if nothing else. I’ve been doing work like that all my life.”

“You were a gardener?” Nia asked.

“No, it was just a matter of eating or not eating. I’ve done a number of things, including teach—although I’m not academically qualified to teach. But I’m literate, and the idea of leaving children illiterate is criminal.”

As she smiled her delight at hearing such agreement with her own thoughts, I handed her the drawing. On the lower right side of it I had written the first verse of Earthseed, “All that you touch, /You Change….” On the other I had written the “To shape God” verse that she liked.

She read the verses and looked at the picture for a long, long time. It was a detailed drawing, not just a sketch, and I felt almost pleased with it. Then she looked at me and said

in a voice almost too soft to hear, “Thank you.”

She asked us to stay the night, offered to let us sleep in her barn, proving that she hadn’t altogether lost her fear of us. We stayed, and the next day I did a few odd repair jobs around the house for her. I could have stolen her blind if I’d wanted to, but what I had decided that I wanted from her, I couldn’t steal. She had to give it.

I told her that evening that I was a woman. First, though, I told her about Larkin. We were in her kitchen. She was cooking. She’d told me to sit down and talk to her. I’d worked hard, she said. I’d earned a rest.

I never took my eyes off her as I told her. It was important that she not feel foolish, frightened, or angry when she understood. A little confusion and mild embarrassment was inevitable, but that should be all.

She looked as though she might cry when she heard about my Larkin. That was all right. Len was in the living room, delighting in reading real books made of paper. She would not see any tears Nia shed—in case Nia was sensitive about that kind of thing. You could never be altogether sure what another person might feel as a humiliation or an invasion of privacy.

“What happened to…to the child’s mother?” Nia asked.

I didn’t answer until she turned to look at me. “It’s dangerous on the road,” I said. “You know that. People vanish out there. I walked from the Los Angeles area to Humboldt County in ’27, so I know it. Know it too well.”

“She vanished on the road? She was killed?”

“She vanished on the road to avoid being killed.” I paused. “She’s me, Nia.”

Silence. Confusion. “But…”

“You’ve trusted us. Now I’m trusting you. I’m a man on the road. I have to be. Two women out there would be

everyone's target." There. I was not correcting her, not smiling at the joke I'd played on her. I was making myself vulnerable to her, and asking her to understand and keep my secret. Just right, I hoped. It felt right.

She blinked and then stared at me. She left her pots and came over to take a good look. "I can hardly believe you," she whispered.

And I smiled. "You can, though. I wanted you to know." I drew a deep breath. "Not that it's safe for a man out there either. The people who took my child also killed my husband and wiped out my community—all in the name of God, of course."

She sat down at the table with me. "Crusaders. I've heard of them, of course—that they rescue homeless orphans and…burn witches, for heaven's sake. But I've never heard that they…just killed people and…stole their children." But it seemed that what the Crusaders had done could not quite get her mind off what I had done. "But you…," she said. "I can't get over it. I still feel…I still feel as though you were a man. I mean…"

"It's all right."

She sighed, put her head back and looked at me with a sad smile. "No, it isn't."

No, it wasn't. But I went to her and hugged her and held her. Like Len, she needed to be hugged and held, needed to cry in someone's arms. She'd been alone far too long. To my own surprise, I realized that under other circumstances, I might have taken her to bed. I had gone through 17 months at Camp Christian without wanting to be with anyone. I missed Bankole—missed him so much sometimes that it was an almost physical pain. And I had never been tempted to want to make love with a woman. Now, I found myself almost wanting to. And she almost

wanted me to. But that wasn't the relationship that I needed between us.

I mean to see her again, this kind, lonely woman in her large, empty, shabby house. I need people like her. Until I met her, I had not realized how much I needed such people. Len had been right about what I should be doing, although she had known no more than I about how it must be done. I still don't know enough. But there's no manual for this kind of thing. I suppose that I'll be learning what to do and how to do it until the day I die.

The three of us talked about Earthseed again over dinner. Most often we talked of it from the point of view of education. By the time we parted for the night, I could speak of it as Earthseed without worrying that Nia would feel harassed or proselytized. We stayed one more day and I told her more about Acorn, and about the children of Acorn. I held her once more when she cried. I kissed her lonely mouth, then put her away from me.

I did two more sketches, each accompanied by verses, and I let her offer to look after any of the children of Acorn that I could find until their parents could be contacted. I never suggested it, but I did all I could to open ways for her to suggest it. She was afraid of the children of the road, light-fingered and often violent. But she was not, in theory at least, afraid of the children of Acorn. They were connected with me, and after three days, she had no fear at all of me. That was very compelling, somehow, that complete acceptance and trust. It was hard for me to leave her.

By the time we did leave, she was as much with me as Len was. The verses and the sketches and memories will keep her with me for a while. I'll have to visit her again

soon—say within the year—to hold on to her, and I intend to do that. I hope I'll soon be bringing her a child or two to protect and teach—one of Acorn's or not. She needs purpose as much as I need to give it to her.

"That was fascinating," Len said to me this morning as we got under way again, "I enjoyed watching you work."

I glanced at her. "Thank you for working with me."

She smiled, then stopped smiling. "You seduce people. My God, you're always at it, aren't you?"

"People fascinate me," I said. "I care about them. If I didn't, Earthseed wouldn't mean anything at all to me."

"Are you really going to bring that poor woman children to look after?"

"I hope to."

"She can barely look after herself. That house looks as though the next storm will knock it over."

"Yes. I'll have to see what I can do about that, too."

"Do you have that kind of money?"

"No, of course not. But someone does. I don't know how I'm going to do it, Len, but the world is full of needy people. They don't all need the same things, but they all need purpose. Even some of the ones with plenty of money need purpose."

"What about Larkin?"

"I'll find her. If she's alive, I'll find her. I've sworn that."

We walked in silence for a while. There were a few other walkers in clusters, passing us or walking far ahead or behind us. The broad highway was broken and old and stretched long in front of us, but it wasn't threatening, somehow. Not now.

After a while, Len caught my arm and I turned to look at her. It was good to be walking with someone. Good to

have another pair of eyes, another pair of hands. Good to hear another voice say my name, another brain questioning, demanding, even sneering.

"What do you want of me?" she asked. "What is it that you want me to do? You have to tell me that."

"Help me reach people," I said. "Go on working with me, and helping me. There's so much to be done."

THURSDAY, JUNE 21, 2035

As my father used to quote from his old King James Bible, "Pride goeth before destruction and an haughty spirit before a fall." He liked to be accurate about his quotes.

I'm bruised and wounded about the pride, but not destroyed, at least.

I decided yesterday that things had worked out so well with Nia that I could go on recruiting people as we walked toward Portland. Walking through a roadside town that seemed big enough for people not to be alarmed at the sight of a stranger, I stopped to ask a woman who was sweeping her front porch whether we could do some yard work for a meal. With no warning, she opened her front door, called her two big dogs, and told them to get us. We barely got out of her yard in time to avoid being bitten. Interesting that neither of us drew a gun or uttered a sound. It turns out that Len's fear of dogs is as strong as mine. Last night, she showed me some scars given her by a dog that her former owners had allowed to get too close.

Anyway, the woman with the two dogs cursed us, called us "thieves, killers, heathens, and witches." She promised to call the cops on us.

"All that just because you asked for work," Len said.

“Thank heavens you didn’t try to tell her about Earthseed!” She was cleaning a long, deep scratch on her arm. It came from a nail that stuck out from the woman’s wooden gate. I had spotted the dogs in time to shove her back through the gate, dive through myself, then slam the gate by grabbing a bottom slat and yanking. I only just let go in time to avoid a lot of long, sharp teeth, and damned if the dog didn’t bite one of the wooden slats of the fence in frustration at not being able to get at me. I had skinned hands and a bruised hip. Len had her long scratch, which hurt and bled enough to scare me. Later, I treated us both to tetanus skin tabs. They cost more than they should, but neither of us is up-to-date on our immunizations anymore. Best not to take unnecessary chances.

“I wonder what happened to that woman to make her willing to do a thing like that,” I said as we walked this morning.

“She was out of her mind,” Len said. “That’s all.”

“That’s rarely all,” I said.

Then early today, a farm woman drove us off with a rifle and I decided to quit trying for a day or two. A storekeeper told us that Jarret’s Crusaders have been active in the area. They’ve been rounding up vagrants, singling out witches and heathens, and generally scaring the hell out of householders by warning them about the dangers and evils of strangers from the road.

It was interesting to see how angry the storekeeper was. The Crusaders, he said, are bad for business. They collar his highway customers or frighten them away, and they intimidate his local customers so that he’s lost a lot of his regulars—the ones who live a long way from his store. They’ve learned to shop as close to home as they can with little regard for quality or price.

“Jarret says he can’t control his own Crusaders,” the man said. “Next time out, I’ll vote for someone who’ll put the bastards in jail where they belong!”

TWENTY-ONE

From EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING

To survive,
Let the past
Teach you—
Past customs,
Struggles,
Leaders and thinkers.
Let
These
Help you.
Let them inspire you,
Warn you,
Give you strength.
But beware:
God is Change.
Past is past.
What was
Cannot
Come again.
To survive,
Know the past.
Let it touch you.
Then let
The past Go.

I DON'T KNOW THAT Uncle Marc would ever have told me the truth about my mother. I don't believe he intended

to. He never wavered from his story that she was dead, and I never suspected that he was lying. I loved him, believed in him, trusted him completely. When he found out how I was living, he invited me to live with him and continue my education. "You're a bright girl," he said, "and you're family—the only family I have. I couldn't help your mother. Let me help you."

I said yes. I didn't even have to think about it. I quit my job and went to live in one of his houses in New York. He hired a housekeeper and tutors and bought computer courses to see to it that I had the college education that Kayce and Madison wouldn't have provided for me if they could have. Kayce used to say, "You're a girl! If you know how to keep a clean, decent house and how to worship God, you know enough!"

I even went back to church because of Uncle Marc. I went back to the Church of Christian America, physically, at least. I lived at his second home in upstate New York, and I attended church on Sundays because he wanted me to, and because I was so used to doing it. I was comfortable doing it. I sang in the choir again and did regular charity work, helping to care for old people in one of the church nursing homes. Doing those things again was like slipping into a comfortable old pair of shoes.

But the truth was, I had lost whatever faith I once had. The church I grew up in had turned its back on me just because I moved out of the home of people who, somehow, never learned even to like me. Forget love. Fine behavior for good Christian Americans, trying to build a strong, united country.

Better, I decided after much thought and much

reading of history, to live a decent life and behave well toward other people. Better not to worry about the Christian Americans, the Catholics, the Lutherans, or whatever. Each denomination seemed to think that it had the truth and the only truth and its people were going to bliss in heaven while everyone else went to eternal torment in hell.

But the Church wasn't only a religion. It was a community—my community. I didn't want to be free of it. That would have been—had been—impossibly lonely. Everyone needs to be part of something.

By the time I got my Master's in history, I found that I couldn't muster any belief in a literal heaven or hell, anyway. I thought the best we could all do was to look after one another and clean up the various hells we've made right here on earth. That seemed to me a big enough job for any person or group, and that was one of the good things that Christian America worked hard at.

I went on living in Uncle Marc's upstate New York house. Once I had my Master's, I began work on my Ph.D. Also, I began creating Dreamask scenarios. Dreamask International hired me on the strength of several scenarios I had done for them on speculation.

Now, thanks to Uncle Marc, I had the Dreamask scenario recorder I had longed for when I was little. Now I had the freedom to create pretty much anything I wanted to. I did my work under the name Asha Vere. I wanted no connection with the Alexanders, yet I felt uncomfortable about trading on my connection with Uncle Marc, and calling myself Duran. At the time, I believed Duran was my mother's family name. My father's surname, "Bankole," meant nothing to me since

Uncle Marc couldn't tell me much about Taylor Franklin Bankole—only that he was a doctor and very old when I was born. Asha Vere was name enough for me. It dated me as a child born during the popularity of a particular early Mask, but that didn't matter. And the Dreamask people kind of liked it.

I worked at home on my Masks and on my Ph.D., and was so casual about the degree that I was 32 before I completed it. I enjoyed the work, enjoyed Marc's company when he came to me to get away from his public and enjoy some feeling of family. I was happy. I never found anyone I wanted to marry. In fact, I had never seen a marriage that I would have wanted to be part of. There must be good marriages somewhere, but to me, marriage had the feel of people tolerating each other, enduring each other because they were afraid to be alone or because each was a habit that the other couldn't quite break. I knew that not everyone's marriage was as sterile and ugly as Kayce's and Madison's. I knew that intellectually, but emotionally, I couldn't seem to escape Kayce's cold, bitter dissatisfaction and Madison's moist little hands.

Uncle Marc, on the other hand, had said without ever quite saying it that he preferred men sexually, but his church taught that homosexuality was sin, and he chose to live by that doctrine. So he had no one. Or at least, I never knew him to have anyone. That looks bleak on the page, but we each chose our lives. And we had one another. We were a family. That seemed to be enough.

Meanwhile, my mother was giving her attention to her other child, her older and best beloved child, Earthseed.

Somehow we—or at least *I*—never paid much attention to the growing Earthseed movement. It was out there. In spite of the efforts of Christian America and other denominations, there were always cults out there. Granted, Earthseed was an unusual cult. It financed scientific exploration and inquiry, and technological creativity. It set up grade schools and eventually colleges, and offered full scholarships to poor but gifted students. The students who accepted had to agree to spend seven years teaching, practicing medicine, or otherwise using their skills to improve life in the many Earthseed communities. Ultimately, the intent was to help the communities to launch themselves toward the stars and to live on the distant worlds they found circling those stars.

"Do you know anything about these people?" I asked Uncle Marc after reading and hearing a few news items about them.

"Are they serious? Interstellar emigration? My god, why don't they just move to Antarctica if they want to rough it?" And he surprised me by making a straight line of his mouth and looking away. I had expected him to laugh.

"They're serious," he said. "They're sad, ridiculous, misled people who believe that the answer to all human problems is to fly off to Alpha Centauri."

I did laugh. "Is a flying saucer coming for them or what?"

He shrugged. "They're pathetic. Forget about them."

I didn't, of course. I left my usual haunts on the nets and began to research them. I wasn't serious. I didn't plan to do anything with what I learned, but I

was curious—and I might get an idea for a Mask. I found that Earthseed was a wealthy sect that welcomed everyone and was willing to make use of everyone. It owned land, schools, farms, factories, stores, banks, several whole towns. And it seemed to own a lot of well-known people—lawyers, physicians, journalists, scientists, politicians, even members of Congress.

And were they all hoping to fly off to Alpha Centauri?

It wasn't that simple, of course. But to tell the truth, the more I read about Earthseed, the more I despised it. So much needed to be done here on earth—so many diseases, so much hunger, so much poverty, such suffering, and here was a rich organization spending vast sums of money, time, and effort on nonsense. Just nonsense!

Then I found *The Books of the Living* and I accessed images and information concerning Lauren Oya Olamina.

Even after reading about my mother and seeing her I didn't notice anything. I never looked at her image and thought, "Oh, she looks like me." She did look like me, though—or rather, I looked like her. But I didn't notice. All I saw was a tall, middle-aged, dark-skinned woman with arresting eyes and a nice smile. She looked, somehow, like someone I would be inclined to like and trust—which scared me. It made me immediately dislike and distrust her. She was a cult leader, after all. She was supposed to be seductive. But she wasn't going to seduce me.

And all that was only my reaction to her image. No wonder she was so rich, no wonder she could draw followers even into such a ridiculous religion. She was

dangerous.

FROM *The Journals of Lauren Oya Olamina* SUNDAY, JULY 29, 2035

Portland.

I've gathered a few more people. They aren't people who will travel with me or come together in easily targetable villages. They're people in stable homes—or people who need homes.

Isis Duarte Norman, for instance, lives in a park between the river and the burned, collapsed remains of an old hotel. She has a shack there—wood covered with plastic sheeting. Each evening she can be found there. During the day she works, cleaning other women's houses. This enables her to eat and keep herself and her secondhand clothing clean. She has a hard life, but it's as respectable as she can make it. She's 43. The man she married when she was 23 dumped her six years ago for a 14-year-old girl—the daughter of one of his servants.

"She was so beautiful," Isis said. "I knew he wouldn't be able to keep his hands off her. I couldn't protect her from him any more than I could protect myself, but I never thought that he would keep her and throw me out,"

He did. And for six years, she's been homeless and all but hopeless. She said she had thought of killing herself. Only fear had stopped her—the fear of not quite dying, of maiming herself and dying a slow, lingering death of pain and starvation. That could happen. Portland is a vast, crowded city. It isn't Los Angeles or the Bay Area, but it is huge. People ignore one another in self-defense. I find this both useful and frightening. When I met Isis, it was because

I went to the door of a home where she was working. Otherwise, she would never have dared to talk to me. As it was, she was designated to assemble a meal and bring it to me when I had finished cleaning up the backyard.

She was wary when she brought the food. Then she looked at the backyard and told me I had done a good job. We talked for a while. I walked her to her shack—which made her nervous. I was a man again. I find it inconvenient and dangerous to be on the street as a homeless woman. Other people manage it well. I don't, somehow.

I left Isis without seeing the inside of her shack. Best not to push people. Best, as Len says, to seduce them. I've seen Isis several times since then. I've talked with her, read verses to her, captured her interest. She has two half-grown children who live with their father's mother, so she cares, in spite of herself, about what the future will bring. I intend to find a real home for her by getting her a live-in job looking after children. That might take time, but I intend to do it.

On the other hand, I've met and gathered in Joel and Irma Elford, who hired me when I first came to Portland to paint a garage and a fence and do some yard work. Len and I worked together, first cutting weeds, harvesting row crops, raking, cleaning the yard at the back of the property where a wilderness had begun to grow. Then, when the dust settled, we painted the garage. We would have to get to the fence the next day. We were to get hard currency for this job, and that put us in a good mood. Len is a likable person to work with. She learns fast, complains endlessly, and does an excellent job, however long it takes. Most of the time, she enjoys herself. The complaining was just one of her quirks.

Then Joel and Irma invited us in to eat with them at

their table. I had done a quick sketch of Irma to catch her attention, and added a verse that was intended to reach her through environmental interests that I had heard her express:

There is nothing alien
About nature.
Nature
Is all that exists.
It's the earth
And all that's on it.
It's the universe
And all that's in it.
It's God,
Never at rest.
It's you,
Me,
Us,
Them,
Struggling upstream
Or drifting down.

Also, perhaps because her mother had died the year before, Irma also seemed touched by this fragment of funeral oration.

We give our dead
To the orchards
And the groves.
We give our dead
To life.

We were an unexpected novelty, and the Elfords were curious about us. They let us wash up in their back bathroom and change into cleaner clothing from our packs. Then they sat us down, fed us a huge meal, and began to ask us questions. Where were we going? Did we have homes? Families? No? Well, how long had we been homeless? What did we do for shelter in rough weather? Weren't we afraid "out there"?

I answered for both of us at first, since Len did not seem inclined to talk, and I answered as often with Earthseed verses as with ordinary conversation. It didn't take long for Irma to ask, "What is it you're quoting from?" And then, "May I see it? I've never heard of it." And, "Is this Buddhist? No, I see that it isn't. I very nearly became a Buddhist when I was younger." She's 37. "Very simple little verses. Very direct. But some of them are lovely."

"I want to be understood," I said. "I want to make it easy for people to understand. It doesn't always work, but I was serious about the effort."

Irma was all I could have hoped for. "You wrote these? You? Really? Then tell me please, on page 47…"

They're quiet, childless, middle-aged people who choose to live in a modest, middle-class neighborhood even though they could afford their own walled enclave. They're interested in the world around them and worried about the direction the country has taken. I could see their wealth in the beautiful, expensive little things they've scattered around their home—antique silver and crystal, old leather-bound paper books, paintings, and, for a touch of the modern, a cover-the-earth phone net system that includes, according to Len, the latest in Virtual rooms. They can have all the sights and other sensations of visiting anyplace on earth or any programmed-in imaginary place, all without

leaving home. And yet they were interested in talking to us.

We had to be careful, though. The Elfords may be bored and hungry for both novelty and purpose, but they're not fools. I had to be more open with them than I have been with people like Isis. I told them much of my own story, and I told them what I'm trying to do. They thought I was brave, naive, ridiculous, and…interesting. Out of pity and curiosity they let us sleep in the comfortable little guest house at the back of their property.

The next day, when we had painted the fence, they found more small jobs for us to do, and now and then, they talked to us. And they let us talk to them. They never lost interest.

"What will you ask them to do?" Len said to me that night as we settled in again in the guest house. "You have them, you know, even if they don't realize it yet."

I nodded. "They're hungry for something to do," I said, "starved for some kind of real purpose. I think they'll have some suggestions themselves. They'll feel better if they make the first suggestions. They'll feel in control. Later, I want them to take Allie in. This guest house would be perfect for her and Justin. When they see what she can do with a few sticks of wood and simple tools, they'll be glad to have her. And I think I'll introduce Allie to Isis. I have the feeling they'll hit it off."

"The Elfords have all but seduced themselves for you," Len said.

I nodded. "Think about all the other people we've met who've given us nothing but trouble. I'm glad to meet eager, enthusiastic people now and then."

And of course, I've found my brother again. I find that I've not wanted to talk about that.

Marc has been preaching at one of the big Portland

shelters, helping out with shelter maintenance, and attending a Christian American seminary. He wants to be an ordained minister. He was not happy to see me. I kept showing up to hear him and leaving notes that I wanted a meeting. It took him two weeks to give in.

"I suppose if I moved to Michigan, you'd turn up there," he said by way of greeting.

We were meeting in his apartment building—which was more like a big dormitory. Because he wasn't permitted to have guests in his apartment, we met in the large dining room just off the lobby. It was a clean, dim, plain room crowded with mismatched wooden tables and chairs and nothing else. Its walls were a dim gray-green and the floor was gray tile worn through to the wood in spots. We were alone there, drinking what I was told would be hot cinnamon-apple tea. When I bought a cup from the machine, I found that it tasted like tepid, slightly sweet water. The lights in the room were few, weak, and far apart, and the place worked hard at being as dreary and cheerless as could be managed.

"Service to God is what's important," my brother said, and I realized that I had been looking around and making my unspoken criticism obvious.

"I'm sorry," I said. "If you want to be here, then you should be here. I wish, though…I wish you could spare a little concern for your niece."

"Don't be so condescending! And I've told you what you should do to find her!"

Join CA. I shuddered. "I can't. I just can't. If Cougar were here, could you enlist with him again—just as a job, you know? Could you become one of his helpers?"

"It's not the same!"

"It's the same to me. What Cougar did to you, CAs

Crusaders did to me. The only difference is they did it to me longer. And don't tell me the Crusaders are just renegades. They're not. They're as much part of CA as the shelters are. I spotted one of the men who raped and lashed us at Acorn. He was working as an armed guard at the Eureka shelter."

Marc stood up. He all but pushed his chair over in his eagerness to get away from me. "I've finally got a chance to have what I want," he said. "You're not going to wreck it for me!"

"This isn't about you," I said, still seated. "I wish you had a child, Marc. If you did, you might be able to understand what it's like not to know where she is, whether she's being well treated, or even…even whether she's still alive. *If I could only know*!"

He stood over me for a very long time, looking down at me as though he hated me. "I don't believe you feel anything," he said.

I stared back at him amazed. "Marc, my daughter—"

"You think you're supposed to care, so you pretend to. Maybe you even want to, but you don't."

I think I preferred it when he hit me. I couldn't react except to sit staring at him. Tears spilled from my eyes, but I didn't realize it at the time. I just sat frozen, staring.

After a while, my brother turned and walked away, tears glistening on his own face.

By then, I wanted to hate him. I couldn't quite, but I wanted to.

"Brothers!" Len muttered when I told her what had happened. She had waited for me at the Elford guesthouse. She listened to what I told her and, I suppose, heard it according to her own experience.

"He needs to make everything my fault," I said. "He still can't let himself admit what Christian America did to

me. He couldn't stay with them if they did such things, so he's decided that they're innocent, and somehow everything is my fault."

"Why are you making excuses for him?" Len demanded.

"I'm not. I think that's really what he's feeling. He had tears on his face when he walked away from me. He didn't want me to see that, but I saw it. He has to drive me away or he can't have his dreams. Christian America is teaching him to be the only thing I think he's ever wanted to be—a minister. Like our father."

She sighed and shook her head. "So what are you going to do?"

"I…don't know. Maybe the Elfords can suggest something."

"Them, yes….Irma asked me while you were gone whether you would be willing to speak to a group of her friends. She wants to have a party and, I suppose, show you off."

"You're kidding!"

"I said I thought you would do it."

I got up and went to look out the window at a pear tree, dark against the night sky. "You know, if I could only find my daughter, I would think my life was going along beautifully."

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 16, 2035

I've managed to get Marc to meet with me again at last.

He may be the only relative I have left on earth. I don't want him as an enemy.

"Just tell me you'll help my Larkin if you ever find her," I said.

“How could I do less?” he asked, still with a certain coldness.

“I wish you well, Marc. I always have. You’re my brother, and I love you. Even with all that’s happened, I can’t help loving you.”

He sighed. We were sitting in his building’s vast, drab dining room again. This time there were other people scattered around, eating late lunches or early dinners. Most were men, young and old, individuals and small groups. Some stared at me with what seemed to be disapproval. “You can’t know what Christian America has meant to me,” he said. His voice had softened. He looked less distant.

“Of course I can,” I told him. “I’m here because I do understand. You’ll be a Christian American minister, and I’ll be your heathen sister. I can stand that. What I find hard to stand is being your enemy. I never meant for that to happen.”

After a while, he said, “We aren’t enemies. You’re my sister, and I love you too.”

We shook hands. I don’t think I’ve ever shaken hands with my brother before, but I got the feeling that it was as much contact as he was willing to endure, at least for now.

Allie and Justin have come to Portland to live. I phoned Allie and told her to use some of the money I left with her to buy a ride up with the Georges. The Elfords have agreed to let the two of them live in their guest house. Len and I have been given rooms above the garage at the home of another supporter—a friend of the Elfords.

That’s how I’ve come to think of these people—as supporters. We speak to groups in their houses. We lead discussions and teach the truths of Earthseed. I say “we” because Len has begun to take a more active part. She will

teach on her own someday, and perhaps train someone to help her. As I write those words, I miss her as though she had already gone off on her own, as though I already had some new young skeptic to train.

Through the Elfords and their friends and the friends of their friends, we've received invitations to speak all over town in people's homes and in small halls. I've found that in each group there is one person, perhaps two, who are serious, who hear in Earthseed something that they can accept, something they want, something they need. These are the ones who will make our first schools possible.

In Acorn, it was no accident that the church and the school were the same. They weren't just the same building. They were the same institution. If the Earthseed Destiny is to have any meaning beyond a distant mythical paradise, Earthseed must be not only a belief system but a way of life. Children should be raised in it. Adults should be reminded of it often, refocused on it, and urged toward it. Both should understand how their current behavior is or isn't contributing to fulfillment of the Destiny. By the time we're able to send Earthseed children to college, they should be dedicated not only to a course of study but to the fulfillment of the Destiny. If they are, then any course of study they choose can become a tool for the fulfillment.

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 30, 2035

I've found a potential home for Travis and Natividad. I've called them several times, and gotten no answer. I worried about them until last night when I reached them. They've been living in a squatter camp a few miles from Sacramento. They went there on a rumor that some of

Acorn's children had been seen there. The rumor was false, but their money had run low. They'd had to stop and take jobs doing agricultural work. This was rough because the work paid little more than room and board in horrible little shacks.

They'll come here with the Mora girls and the new Mora baby. I can't restore their children to them, but I can see to it that they have work that sustains them and a decent place to live. They'll live in the big house that is to be our first school. The house belongs to one of my supporters—one who said those magic words: "What can I do? What do you need?"

What don't we need!

The house is a big empty shell that the Douglas and Mora families will have to work hard on. It needs paint, repairs, landscaping, fencing, everything. But it has living room for a big family upstairs and teaching and working room downstairs. It will be a new beginning in so many ways. And the people who own it have relatives in both city and state government. They're the kind of people Jarret's Crusaders have learned to let alone.

Also, next month, Len and I are invited to teach at several homes in the Seattle area.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 13, 2035

I've finally talked Harry into coming north. He's run across the Figueroas and joined with them for the trip. He hasn't found Tabia or Russ, I'm sorry to say, but he has picked up three orphans. He found them on the road just north of San Luis Obispo. Their mother was hit by a truck. He saw it happen and went straight to the kids. There are more and

more vehicles on the road during the day now. Walking is becoming more dangerous.

As horrible as the hit and run was, I get the feeling it's given Harry what he needs—children to protect, children who need him, children who run to him and hold his hands when they're scared. He and Zahra always said they wanted a big family. He's such a good daddy. I have a teaching job for him in Seattle. I believe he'll thrive in it if he can let himself.

Jorge Cho and his family are coming. I've found work for Jorge and Di in Portland.

Now I have to look around for places for the Figueroas.

I believe that I've finally done it. I believe that my life has finally educated me enough to enable me to make a real start at planting
Earthseed. It may be too soon to say this, but it feels true. I believe it is true.

I've allowed the Elfords to make *The First Book of the Living* available free on the nets. I never expected to make money from the book. My only fear has been that someone would take it and change it, make it an instrument of some other theology or use it for some new brand of demagoguery. Joel Elford says the best way to avoid that is to make it available on every possible net and with my name on it. And, of course, the copyright is my legal fallback if someone does begin to misuse it seriously.

"I don't think you realize what you have," Joel told me.

I looked at him in surprise and realized that he believed what he was saying.

"And you don't realize how many other people will want it," he continued. "I've aimed the book particularly at the nets that are intended to interest American universities

and the smaller free cities where so many of those universities are located. It will go out worldwide, but it will draw more attention to itself in those places."

He was smiling, so I asked, "What are you expecting to happen?"

"You're going to start hearing from people," he said. "You'll soon have more attention than you'll know what to do with." He sobered. "And what you actually do with it is important. Be careful." Irma trusted me more than Joel did. Joel was still watching me—watching with a great deal of interest. He says it's like watching a birth.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 30, 2035

I've been traveling.

That's nothing new for me, but this is different. This time, thanks to the book, I've been invited by university groups and others, and paid to travel, paid to speak—which is a little like paying ice to be cold.

And I've been flying. Flying! I've walked over most of the West Coast, and now I've flown over the interior of the country and over much of the East Coast. I've flown to Newark, Delaware; Clarion, Pennsylvania; and up to Syracuse, New York. Next, I go to Toledo, Ohio; Ann Arbor, Michigan; Madison, Wisconsin; and Iowa City, Iowa.

"Not a bad first tour," Joel told me before I left. "I thought you'd arouse interest. People are ready for something new and hopeful."

I was scared to death, worried about flying and worried about speaking to so many strangers. What if I attracted the wrong kind of attention? How would Len handle the experience? And I worried about Len, who seemed to be

even more afraid than I was, especially about flying. I had spent more money than I should have, buying us both decent clothing.

Then Joel and Irma were taking us to the airport in their huge car. One way in which they do indulge themselves is to keep a late-model armed and armored car —a civilian maggot, really. The thing cost as much as a nice house in a good neighborhood, and it's scary-looking enough to intimidate anyone stupid enough to spend their time hijacking vehicles.

"We've never had to use the guns," Irma told me when she showed them to me. "I don't like them. They frighten me. But being without them would frighten me more."

So now Len and I are lecturing and conducting Earthseed Workshops. We're being paid in hard currency, fed well, and allowed to live in good, safe hotels. And we're being welcomed, listened to, even taken seriously by people who are hungry for something to believe in, some difficult but worthwhile goal to involve themselves in and work toward.

We've also been laughed at, argued with, booed, and threatened with hellfire—or gunfire. But Jarret's kind of religion and Jarret himself are getting less and less popular these days. Both, it seems, are bad for business, bad for the U.S. Constitution, and bad for a large percentage of the population. They always have been, but now more and more people are willing to say so in public. The Crusaders have terrorized some people into silence, but they've just made others very angry.

And I'm finding more and more people who have the leisure now to worry about the nasty, downward slide that the country's been on. In the 2020s, when these people were sick, starving, or trying to keep warm, they had no

time or energy to look beyond their own desperate situations. Now, though, as they're more able to meet their own immediate needs, they begin to look around, feel dissatisfied with the slow pace of change, and with Jarret, who with his war and his Crusaders, has slowed it even more. I suppose it would have been different if we'd won the war.

Anyway, some of these dissatisfied people are finding what they want and need in Earthseed. They're the ones who come to me and ask, "What can I do? I believe. Now how can I help?"

So I've begun to reach people. I've reached so many people from Eureka to Seattle to Syracuse that I believe that even if I were killed tomorrow, some of these people would find ways to go on learning and teaching, pursuing the Destiny. Earthseed will go on. It will grow. It will force us to become the strong, purposeful, adaptable people that we must become if we're to grow enough to fulfill the Destiny.

I know things will go wrong now and then. Religions are no more perfect than any other human institutions. But Earthseed will fulfill its essential purpose. *It will force us to become more than we might ever become without it.* And when it's successful, it will offer us a kind of species life insurance. I wish I could live to see that success. I wish I could be one of those who go out to take root among the stars. I can only hope that my Larkin will go—or perhaps some of her children, or even Marc's children.

Whatever happens, as long as I'm alive, I won't stop working, preaching, aiming people toward the Destiny. I've always known that sharing Earthseed was my only true purpose.

EPILOGUE

From EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING

Earthseed is adulthood.
It's trying our wings,
Leaving our mother,
Becoming men and women.

We've been children,
Fighting for the full breasts,
The protective embrace,
The soft lap.
Children do this.
But Earthseed is adulthood.

Adulthood is both sweet and sad.
It terrifies.
It empowers.
We are men and women now.
We are Earthseed.
And the Destiny of Earthseed
Is to take root among the stars.

UNCLE MARC WAS, IN the end, my only family.

I never saw Kayce and Madison again. I sent them money when they were older and in need, and I hired people to look after them, but I never went back to them. They did their duty toward me and I did mine toward them.

My mother, when I finally met her, was still a drifter. She was immensely rich—or, at least, Earthseed was immensely rich. But she had no home of her own—not even a rented apartment. She drifted between the homes of her many friends and supporters, and between the many Earthseed Communities that she established or encouraged in the United States, Canada, Alaska, Mexico, and Brazil. And she went on teaching, preaching, fund-raising, and spreading her political influence. I met her when she visited a New York Earthseed community in the Adirondacks—a place called Red Spruce.

In fact, she went to Red Spruce to rest. She had been traveling and speaking steadily for several months, and she needed a place where she could be quiet and think. I know this because it was what people kept telling me when I tried to reach her. The community protected her privacy so well that for a while, I was afraid I might never get to see her. I'd read that she usually traveled with only an acolyte or two and, sometimes, a bodyguard, but now it seemed that everyone in the community had decided to guard her.

By then, I was 34, and I wanted very much to meet her. My friends and Uncle Marc's housekeeper had told me how much I looked like this charismatic, dangerous, heathen cult leader. I had paid no attention until, in researching Lauren Olamina's life, I discovered that she had had a child, a daughter, and that that daughter had been abducted from an early Earthseed community called Acorn.

The community, according to Olamina's official biography, had been destroyed by Jarret's Crusaders back in the 30s. Its men and women had been enslaved

for over a year by the Crusaders, and all the prepubescent children had been abducted. Most had never been seen again.

The Church of Christian America had denied this and sued Olamina and Earthseed back in the 2040s when Olamina's charge first came to their attention. The church was still powerful, even though Jarret was dead by then. The rumors were that Jarret, after his single term as President, drank himself to death. A coalition of angry business people, protestors against the Al-Can War, and champions of the First Amendment worked hard to defeat him for re-election in 2036. They won by exposing some of the earliest Christian American witch-burnings. It seems that between 2015 and 2019, Jarret himself took part in singling people out and burning them alive. The Pox, then a growing malignancy, had been both the excuse and the cover for this. Jarret and his friends had burned accused prostitutes, drug dealers, and junkies. Also, in their enthusiasm, they burned some innocent people—people who had nothing to do with the sex trade or drugs. When that happened, Jarret's people covered their "mistakes" with denials, threats, more terror, and occasional payoffs to the bereaved families. Uncle Marc researched this himself several years ago, and he says it's true—true and sad and wrong, and in the end, irrelevant. He says Jarret's teachings were right even if the man himself did wrong.

Anyway, the Church of Christian America sued Olamina for her "false" accusations. She countersued. Then suddenly, without explanation, CA dropped its suit and settled with her, paying her an unreported, but reputedly vast sum of money. I was still a kid growing

up with the Alexanders when all this happened, and I heard nothing about it. Years later, when I began to research Earthseed and Olamina, I didn't know what to think of it.

I phoned Uncle Marc and asked him, point-blank, whether there was any possibility that this woman could be my mother.

On my phone's tiny monitor, Uncle Marc's face froze, then seemed to sag. He suddenly looked much older than his 54 years. He said, "I'll talk to you about this when I come home." And he broke the connection. He wouldn't take my calls after that. He had never refused my calls before. Never.

Not knowing what else to do, where else to turn, I checked the nets to see where Lauren Olamina might be speaking or organizing. To my surprise, I learned that she was "resting" at Red Spruce, less than a hundred kilometers from where I was.

And all of a sudden, I had to see her.

I didn't try to phone her, didn't try to reach her with Uncle Marc's well-known name or my own name as a creator of several popular Masks. I just showed up at Red Spruce, rented a room at their guest house, and began trying to find her.

Earthseed doesn't bother with a lot of formality. Anyone can visit its communities and rent a room at a guest house. Visitors came to see relatives who were members, came to attend Gatherings or other ceremonies, even came to join Earthseed and arrange to begin their probationary first year.

I told the manager of the guest house that I thought I might be a relative of Olamina's and asked him if he could tell me how I might make an appointment to

speak with her. I asked him because I had heard people call him "Shaper" and I recognized that from my reading as a title of respect akin to "reverend" or "minister." If he was the community's minister, he might be able to introduce me to Olamina himself.

Perhaps he could have, but he refused. Shaper Olamina was very tired, and not to be bothered, he told me. If I wanted to meet her, I should attend one of her Gatherings or phone her headquarters in Eureka, California, and arrange an appointment.

I had to hang around the community for three days before I could find anyone willing to take my message to her. I didn't see her. No one would even tell me where she was staying within the community. They protected her from me courteously, firmly. Then, all of a sudden, the wall around her gave way. I met one of her acolytes and he took my message to her.

My messenger was a thin, brown-haired young man who said his name was Edison Balter. I met him in the guest-house dining room one morning as we each sat alone, eating bagels and drinking apple cider. I pounced on him as someone I hadn't pestered yet. I had no idea at that time what the Balter name meant to my mother or that this man was an adopted son of one of her best friends. I was only relieved that someone was listening to me, not closing one more door in my face.

"I'm her aide this trip," he told me. "She says I'm just about ready to go out on my own, and the idea scares the hell out of me. What name shall I give her?"

"Asha Vere."

"Oh? Are you the Asha Vere who does Dreamasks?"

I nodded.

"Nice work. I'll tell her. You want to put her in one

of your Masks? You know you do look a lot like her. Like a softer version of her." And he was gone. He talked fast and moved very fast, but somehow without seeming to hurry. He didn't look anything like Olamina himself, but there was a similarity. I found that I liked him at once—just as I'd at first found myself liking her. Another likable cultist. I got the feeling that Red Spruce, a clean, pretty mountain community, was nothing but a nest of seductively colorful snakes—a poisonous place.

Then Edison Balter came back and told me he would take me to her. She was somewhere in her fifties —58, I remembered from my reading. She was born way back in 2009, before the Pox. My god. She was old. But she didn't look old, even though her black hair was streaked with gray. She looked big and strong and, in spite of her pleasant, welcoming expression, just a little frightening. She was a little taller than me, and maybe a little more angular. She looked…not hard, but as though she could be hard with just the smallest change of expression. She looked like someone I wouldn't want to get on the wrong side of. And, yes, even I could see it. She looked like me.

She and I just stood looking at one another for a long, long time. After a while, she came up to me, took my left hand, and turned it to look at the two little moles I have just below the knuckles. My impulse was to pull away, but I managed not to.

She stared at the moles for a while, then said, "Do you have another mark—a kind of jagged dark patch just here?" She touched a place covered by my blouse on my left shoulder near my neck.

This time, I did step away from her touch. I didn't

mean to, but I just don't like to be touched. Not even by a stranger who might be my mother. I said, "I have a birthmark like that, yes."

"Yes," she whispered, and went on looking at me. After a moment, she said, "Sit down. Sit here with me. You are my child, my daughter. I know you are."

I sat in a chair instead of sharing the couch with her. She was open and welcoming, and somehow, that made me want all the more to draw back.

"Have you only just found out?" she asked.

I nodded, tried to speak, and found myself stumbling and stammering. "I came here because I thought…maybe…because I looked up information about you, and I was curious. I mean, I read about Earthseed, and people said I looked like you, and…well, I knew I was adopted, so I wondered."

"So you had adoptive parents. Were they good to you? What's your life been like? What do you…." She stopped, drew a deep breath, covered her face with both hands for a moment, shook her head, then gave a short laugh. "I want to know everything! I can't believe that it's you. I…." Tears began to stream down her broad, dark face. She leaned toward me, and I knew she wanted to hug me. She hugged people. She touched people. She hadn't been raised by Kayce and Madison Alexander.

I looked away from her and shifted around trying to get comfortable in my chair, in my skin, in my newfound identity. "Can we do a gene print?" I asked.

"Yes. Today. Now." She took a phone from her pocket and called someone. No more than a minute later, a woman dressed all in blue came in carrying a small plastic case. She drew a small amount of blood

from each of us, and checked it in a portable diagnostic from her case. The unit wasn't much bigger than Olamina's phone. In less than a minute, though, it spit out two gene prints. They were rough and incomplete, but even I could see both their many differences and their many unmistakably identical points.

"You're close relatives," the woman said. "Anyone would guess that just from looking at you, but this confirms it."

"We're mother and daughter," Olamina said.

"Yes," the woman in blue agreed. She was my mother's age or older—a Puerto Rican woman by her accent. She had not a strand of gray in her black hair, but her face was lined and old. "I had heard, Shaper, that you had a daughter who was lost. And now you've found her."

"She's found me," my mother said.

"God is Change," the woman said, and gathered her equipment. She hugged my mother before she left us. She looked at me, but didn't hug me. "Welcome," she said to me in soft Spanish, and then again, "God is Change." And she was gone.

"Shape God," my mother whispered in a response that sounded both reflexive and religious.

Then we talked.

"I had parents." I said. "Kayce and Madison Alexander. I….We didn't get along. I haven't seen them since I turned 18. They said, 'If you leave without getting married, don't come back!' So I didn't. Then I found Uncle Marc, and I finally—"

She stood up, staring down at me, staring with such a closed look frozen on her face. It shut me out, that look, and I wondered whether this was what she was

really like—cold, distant, unfeeling. Did she only pretend to be warm and open to deceive her public?

"When?" she demanded, and her tone was as cold as her expression. "When did you find Marc? When did you learn that he was your uncle? How did you find out? Tell me!"

I stared at her. She stared back for a moment, then began to pace. She walked to a window, faced it for several seconds, staring out at the mountains. Then she came back to look down at me with what I could only think of as quieter eyes.

"Please tell me about your life," she said. "You probably know something about mine because so much has been written. But I know nothing about yours. Please tell me."

Irrationally, I didn't want to. I wanted to get away from her. She was one of those people who sucked you in, made you like her before you could even get to know her, and only then let you see what she might really be like. She had millions of people convinced that they were going to fly off to the stars. How much money had she taken from them while they waited for the ship to Alpha Centauri? My god, I didn't want to like her. I wanted the ugly persona I had glimpsed to be what she really was. I wanted to despise her.

Instead, I told her the story of my life.

Then we had dinner together, just her and me. A woman who might have been a servant, a bodyguard, or the lady of the house brought in a tray for us.

Then my mother told me the story of my birth, my father, my abduction. Hearing about it from her wasn't like reading an impersonal account. I listened and cried. I couldn't help it.

“What did Marc tell you?” she asked.

I hesitated, not sure what to say. In the end, I told the truth just because I couldn’t think of a decent lie. “He said you were dead—that both my mother and my father were dead.”

She groaned.

“He…he took care of me,” I said. “He saw to it that I got to go to college, and that I had a good place to live. He and I…well, we’re a family. We didn’t have anyone before we found one another.”

She just looked at me.

“I don’t know why he told me you were dead. Maybe he was just…lonely. I don’t know. We got along, he and I, right from the first. I still live in one of his houses. I can afford a place of my own now, but it’s like I said. We’re a family.” I paused, then said something I had never admitted before. “You know, I never felt that anyone loved me before I met him. And I guess I never loved anyone until he loved me. He made it…safe to love him back.”

“Your father and I both loved you,” she said. “We had tried for two years to have a baby. We worried about his age. We worried about the way the world was —all the chaos. But we wanted you so much. And when you were born, we loved you more than you can imagine. When you were taken, and your father was killed…I felt for a while as though I’d died myself. I tried so hard for so long to find you.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. I shrugged uncomfortably. She hadn’t found me. And Uncle Marc had. I wondered just how hard she’d really looked.

“I didn’t even know whether you were still alive,” she said. “I wanted to believe you were, but I didn’t

know. I got involved in a lawsuit with Christian America back in the forties, and I tried to force them to tell me what had happened to you. They claimed that any record there may have been of you was lost in a fire at the Pelican Bay Children's Home years before."

Had they said that? I supposed they might have. They would have said almost anything to avoid giving up evidence of their abductions—and giving a Christian American child back to a heathen cult leader. But still, "Uncle Marc says he found me when I was two or three years old," I said. "But he saw that I had good Christian American parents, and he thought it would be best for me to stay with them, undisturbed." I shouldn't have said that. I'm not sure why I did.

She got up and began to walk again—quick, angry pacing, prowling the room. "I never thought he would do that to me," she said. "I never thought he hated me enough to do a thing like that. I never thought he could hate *anyone* that much. I saved him from slavery! I saved his worthless life, goddamnit!"

"He doesn't hate you," I said. "I'm sure he doesn't. I've never known him to hate anyone. He thought he was doing right."

"Don't defend him," she whispered. "I know you love him, but don't defend him to me. I loved him myself, and see what he's done to me—and to you."

"You're a cult leader," I said. "He's Christian American. He believed—"

"I don't care! I've spoken with him hundreds of times since he found you, and he said nothing. Nothing!"

"He doesn't have any children." I said. "I don't think he ever will. But I was like a daughter to him. He

was like a father to me."

She stopped her pacing and stood staring down at me with an almost frightening intensity. She stared at me as though she hated me.

I stood up, looked around for my jacket, found it, and put it on.

"No!" she said. "No, don't go." All the stiffness and rage went out of her. "Please don't go. Not yet."

But I needed to go. She is an overwhelming person, and I needed to get away from her.

"All right," she said when I headed for the door. "But you can always come to me. Come back tomorrow. Come back whenever you want to. We have so much time to make up for. My door is open to you, Larkin, always."

I stopped and looked back at her, realizing that she had called me by the name that she had given to her baby daughter so long ago. "Asha," I said, looking back at her. "My name is Asha Vere."

She looked confused. Then her face seemed to sag the way Uncle Marc's had when I phoned him to ask about her. She looked so hurt and sad that I couldn't stop myself from feeling sorry for her. "Asha," she whispered. "My door is open to you, Asha. Always."

The next day Uncle Marc arrived, filled with fear and despair.

"I'm sorry," he said to me as soon as he saw me. "I was so happy when I found you after you left your parents. I was so glad to be able to help you with your education. I guess…I had been alone so long that I just couldn't stand to share you with anyone."

My mother would not see him. He came to me almost in tears because he had tried to see her and she

had refused. He tried several more times, and over and over again, she sent people out to tell him to go away.

I went back home with him. I was angry with him, but even angrier with her, somehow. I loved him more than I'd ever loved anyone no matter what he had done, and she was hurting him. I didn't know whether I would ever see her again. I didn't know whether I should. I didn't even know whether I wanted to.

My mother lived to be 81.

She kept her word. She never stopped teaching. For Earthseed, she used herself up several times over speaking, training, guiding, writing, establishing schools that boarded orphans as well as students who had parents and homes. She found sources of money and directed them into areas of study that brought the fulfillment of the Earthseed Destiny closer. She sent promising young students to universities that helped them to fulfill their own potential.

All that she did, she did for Earthseed. I did see her again occasionally, but Earthseed was her first "child," and in some ways her only "child."

She was planning a lecture tour when her heart stopped just after her eighty-first birthday. She saw the first shuttles leave for the first starship assembled partly on the Moon and partly in orbit. I was not on any of the shuttles, of course. Neither was Uncle Marc, and neither of us has children.

But Justin Gilchrist was on that ship. He shouldn't have been at his age, of course, but he was. And the son of Jessica Faircloth has gone, ironically. He's a biologist. The Mora girls, their children, and the whole surviving Douglas family have gone. They, in

particular, were her family. All Earthseed was her family. We never really were, Uncle Marc and I. She never really needed us, so we didn't let ourselves need her. Here is the last journal entry of hers that seems to apply to her long, narrow story.

FROM *The Journals of Lauren Oya Olamina*
THURSDAY, JULY 20, 2090

I know what I've done.

I have not given them heaven, but I've helped them to give themselves the heavens. I can't give them individual immortality, but I've helped them to give our species its only chance at immortality. I've helped them to the next stage of growth. They're young adults now, leaving the nest. It will be rough on them out there. It's always rough on the young when they leave the protection of the mother. It will take a toll—perhaps a heavy one. I don't like to think about that, but I know it's true. Out there, though, among the stars on the living worlds we already know about and on other worlds that we haven't yet dreamed of, some will survive and change and thrive and some will suffer and die.

Earthseed was always true. I've made it real, given it substance. Not that I ever had a choice in the matter. If you want a thing—truly want it, want it so badly that you need it as you need air to breathe, then unless you die, you will have it. Why not? It has you. There is no escape. What a cruel and terrible thing escape would be if escape were possible.

The shuttles are fat, squat, ugly, ancient-looking space trucks. They look as though they could be a hundred years old. They're very different from the early ones under the

skin, of course. The skin itself is substantially different. But except for being larger, today's space shuttles don't look that different from those a hundred years ago. I've seen pictures of the old ones.

Today's shuttles have been loaded with cargoes of people, already deeply asleep in DiaPause—the suspended-animation process that seems to be the best of the bunch. Traveling with the people are frozen human and animal embryos, plant seeds, tools, equipment, memories, dreams, and hopes. As big and as space-worthy as they are, the shuttles should sag to the Earth under such a load. The memories alone should overload them. The libraries of the Earth go with them. All this is to be off-loaded on the Earth's first starship, the *Christopher Columbus*.

I object to the name. This ship is not about a shortcut to riches and empire. It's not about snatching up slaves and gold and presenting them to some European monarch. But one can't win every battle. One must know which battles to fight. The name is nothing.

I couldn't have watched this first Departure on a screen or in a virtual room or in some personalized version beneath a Dreamask. I would have traveled across the world on foot to see this Departure if I'd had to. This is my life flying away on these ugly big trucks. This is my immortality. I have a right to see it, hear the thunder of it, smell it.

I will go with the first ship to leave after my death. If I thought I could survive as something other than a burden, I would go on this one, alive. No matter. Let them someday use my ashes to fertilize their crops. Let them do that. It's arranged. I'll go, and they'll give me to their orchards and their groves.

Now, with my friends and the children of my friends, I

watch. Lacy Figueroa, Myra Cho, Edison Balter and his daughter, Jan, and Harry Balter, bent, gray, and smiling. It took Harry so long to learn to smile again after the loss of Zahra and the children. He's a man who should smile. He stands with one arm around his granddaughter and the other around me. He's my age. Eighty-one. Impossible. Eighty-one! God is Change.

My Larkin would not come. I begged her, but she refused. She's caring for Marc. He's just getting over another heart transplant. How completely, how thoroughly he has stolen my child. I have never even tried to forgive him.

Now, I watch as, one by one, the ships lift their cargoes from the Earth. I feel alone with my thoughts until I reach out to hug each of my friends and look into their loved faces, this one solemn, that one joyous, all of them wet with tears. Except for Harry, they'll all go soon in these same shuttles. Perhaps Harry's ashes and mine will keep company someday. The Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars, after all, and not to be filled with preservative poisons, boxed up at great expense, as is the revived fashion now, and buried uselessly in some cemetery. I know what I've done.

> *For the kingdom of heaven is as a man traveling into a far country, who called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods. And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one; to every man according to his several ability; and straightway took his journey.*
>
> *Then he that had received the five talents*

went and traded with the same and made them other five talents. And likewise he that had received two, he also gained other two. But he that had received one went and digged in the earth and hid his lord's money.

After a long time the lord of these servants cometh, and reckoneth with them. And so he that had received five talents came and brought the other five talents, saying, Lord, thou deliverest unto me five talents: behold, I have gained beside them five talents more.

His lord said unto him, Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord.

He also that had received two talents came and said, Lord, thou deliverest unto me two talents: behold, I have gained two other talents beside them.

His lord said unto him, Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord.

Then he which had received the one talent came and said, Lord, I knew thee that thou art an hard man, reaping where thou hast not sown, and gathering where thou has not strawed: And I was aftaid and went and hid thy talent in the earth: lo, there thou hast what is thine.

His lord answered and said unto him, Thou wicked and slothful servant, thou knewest that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not strawed: Thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury.

Take therefore the talent from him and give it unto him which hath ten talents. For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.

THE BIBLE
AUTHORIZED KING JAMES VERSION
ST. MATTHEW 25:14-30

A Biography of Octavia E. Butler

Octavia E. Butler (1947–2006) was a bestselling and award-winning author, considered one of the best science fiction writers of her generation. She received both the Hugo and Nebula awards, and in 1995 became the first author of science fiction to receive a MacArthur Fellowship. She was also awarded the prestigious PEN Lifetime Achievement Award in 2000.

Butler's father died when she was very young; her mother raised her in Pasadena, California. Shy, tall, and dyslexic, Butler immersed herself in reading whatever books she could find. She began writing at twelve, when a B movie called *Devil Girl from Mars* inspired her to try writing a better science-fiction story.

She took writing classes throughout college, attending the Clarion Writers Workshop and, in 1969, the Open Door Workshop of the Screenwriters' Guild of America, a program designed to mentor Latino and African American writers. There she met renowned science fiction author Harlan Ellison, who adopted Butler as his protégé.

In 1974 she began writing *Patternmaster* (1976), set in a future world where a network of all-powerful telepaths dominate humanity. Praised both for its imaginative vision and for Butler's powerful prose, the novel spawned four prequels, beginning with *Mind of My Mind* (1977) and finishing with *Clay's Ark* (1984).

Although the Patternist series established Butler among the science fiction elite, *Kindred* (1979) brought her

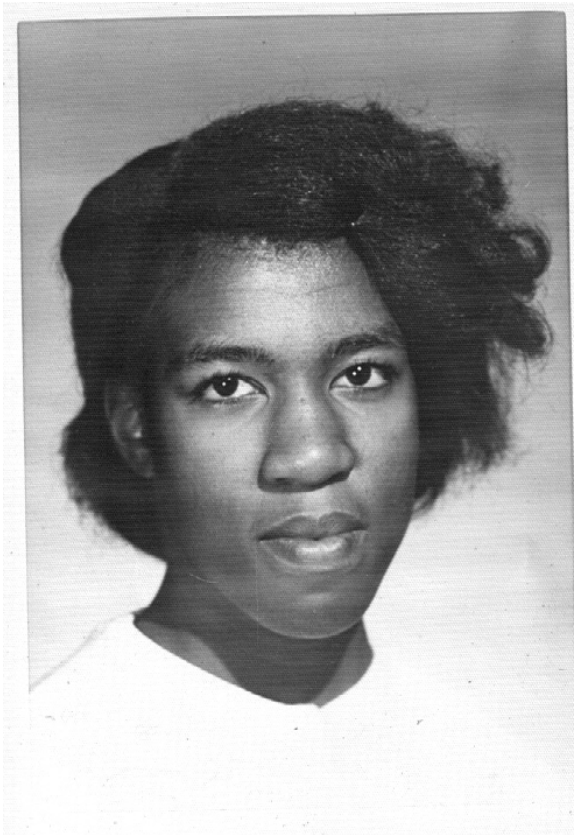
mainstream success. In that novel, a young black woman travels back in time to the antebellum South, where she is called on to protect the life of a white, slaveholding ancestor. *Kindred*'s protagonist stood out in a genre that, at the time, was widely dominated by white men.

In 1985, Butler won Nebula and Hugo awards for the novella *Bloodchild*, which was reprinted in 1995 as *Bloodchild and Other Stories*. *Dawn* (1987) began the Xenogenesis trilogy, about a race of aliens who visit earth to save humanity from itself. *Adulthood Rites* (1988) and *Imago* (1989) continue the story, following the life of the first child born with a mixture of alien and human DNA.

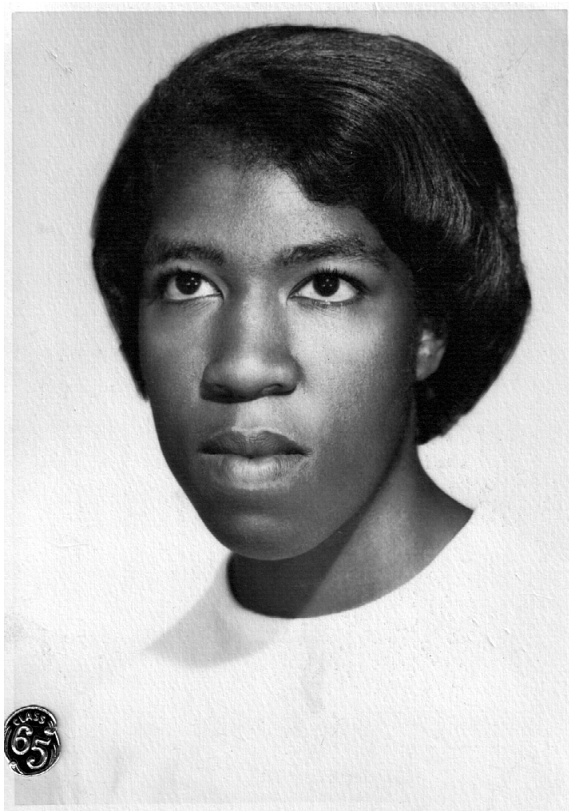
Fledgling (2005), which combines vampire and science fiction narratives, was Butler's final novel. "She wasn't writing romance or feel-good novels," mystery author Walter Mosley said. "She was writing very difficult, brilliant work." Her books have been translated into several languages, and continue to appear widely in school and college literature curricula.

Butler died at home in Washington in 2006.

Butler, age three, sits with her mother for a photo in Los Angeles in 1951.



Butler at age thirteen. She began writing the year before when a science fiction film—the cult favorite *Devil Girl from Mars*—inspired her to create something of her own.



Butler's 1965 senior class photo from John Muir High School in Pasadena, California.

Butler reading a book in 1975, the year before she published *Patternmaster*.

Butler on a book tour for *Parable of the Sower* in New York City in 1993.

Butler addresses the audience at Marygrove College, Detroit, during the Contemporary American Author Lecture Series in 1994.

Butler won both Nebula and Hugo awards for her contributions to the science fiction genre. (Photo courtesy of Anna Fedor.)

Butler with authors Tananarive Due, Jewelle Gomez (standing), Samuel R. Delany, and Steven Barnes (sitting) at Clark Atlanta University's conference for African American science fiction writers—the first of its kind—in 1997.

When Butler passed away in 2006, the *New York Times* eulogized her as a world-renowned author whose science fiction explored "far-reaching issues of race, sex, power and, ultimately, what it means to be human."

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cover design by Mumtaz Mustafa

978-1-4532-6362-4

This edition published in 2012 by Open Road Integrated Media
180 Varick Street
New York, NY 10014
www.openroadmedia.com

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